







**MAIN** Hans-Joachim Marseille scores another victory over an RAF aircraft in his Me 109 'Yellow 14'. (ANTONIS KARIDIS)

**BELOW** Hans-Joachim Marseille, the 'Star of Africa', wearing his Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oakleaves, Swords and Diamonds. (ALL IMAGES VIA AUTHOR)

Hans Joachim Marseille the fighter pilot was trouble - but if he was trouble to his Luftwaffe superiors then he was more than trouble to the Allied fighter pilots of the Western Desert. It was here that he found both his mark and his fame. **Robin Schäfer** tells the extraordinary story of Germany's rebellious Top Gun of North Africa.



# The Star of Africa



I first heard about Hans Joachim Marseille in 1990 when I was just 14 years old. I was visiting my grandmother and had been telling her about another great German pilot, Adolf Galland, whose book I had just read and whom I had been allowed to visit at his house in Königswinter a week before, (it is something I still very much like to talk about!) When I told my grandmother about having met the former General of the Luftwaffe, CO of the feared 'Abbeville boys' and the legendary Jagdverband 44, she was rather unimpressed. "He's the one with the moustache isn't he?", thus reducing my idol and personal hero to the mere growth on his upper lip.

She then added: "Marseille is a pilot I remember well, I even had a photograph of him. He was very handsome and looked like a movie star. Back then, all the girls adored him. He was known as the Star of Africa". It took me a while to recover from my grandmother's lack of awe and interest in my adventure, but a few weeks later my father bought me a VHS tape of Alfred Weidenmann's 1957 movie "Der Stern von Afrika", a cinematization of events which introduced me to Hans-Joachim Marseille's short, but intense life as one history's greatest fighter pilots and Nazi propaganda icon.

## End Of A Shooting Star

On 30 September 1942, at 10:47am Marseille had taken off with his Staffel to offer top cover for a unit of Stuka dive bombers. No enemy aircraft were encountered and no ➤



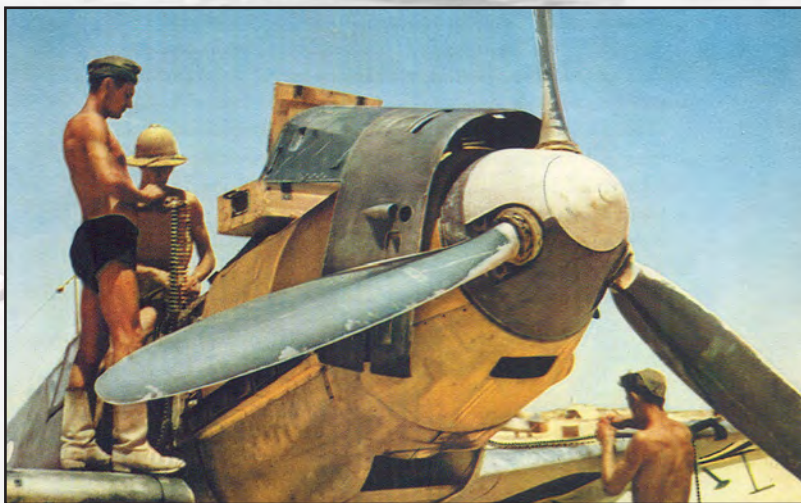


**ABOVE**

During the Battle of Britain, and over the English Channel, Hans-Joachim Marseille was downed four times but also scored his first seven victories.

**RIGHT**

Under the baking desert sun, armourers re-load the ammunition into one of JG27's Me 109s.



standard procedure before bailing out, the canopy ripped off and the pilot dropped out of the aircraft. The parachute, though, didn't open. At 11:36am Hans-Joachim Marseille, the Star of Africa and Top-Gun of the Luftwaffe in the war in the western desert, was dead. He was probably killed before he hit the ground. It was found the parachute release handle had not been pulled; there had been no attempt to open it. When the body was recovered from the desert a long gash was found across Marseille's chest, making it clear that his body had been hit by the vertical stabiliser of his fighter - most probably killing him instantly, or at least rendering him

**“Marseille isn't a model soldier as everything relating to discipline is totally alien to him. Nevertheless he is a great pilot. He will go far if he finds understanding superiors who understand his peculiarities”  
(Evaluation Record, 1939)**

**RIGHT**

A ground crew man paints the emblem of JG27 onto the engine cowling of a Messerschmitt 109.

casualties were sustained. During the flight back to base the cockpit of his Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2/trop began filling with smoke. Later, the radio communication was reconstructed. Marseille reported “From Elbe I (his call-sign). Got smoke emission inside the cockpit. I can't see”. His wingmen, Jost Schlang and Rainer Pöttgen tried guiding him back to the German lines. They tried to keep his spirits up: “Only three minutes to Alamein, Joachim!” Two minutes, then only one and German occupied territory had been reached.

After passing the White Mosque of Sidi Abdel Rahman, Marseille transmitted his last radio message: “I've got to get out now, I can't stand it anymore”. His wingmen saw him rolling his 109 onto its back, the





**RIGHT**

*Hans-Joachim Marseille, the darling of the Nazi propaganda machine, talks to an enthralled audience of Hitler Youth boys about his combats.*

unconscious so he could not deploy his parachute.

After Werner Mölders, Adolf Galland and Gordon Gollob, Marseille had been the fourth fighter pilot to be decorated with Diamonds to the Knights Cross with Oakleaves and Swords. At only 22 years old he had been the youngest Hauptmann of the Luftwaffe. Only a year before he had been a lowly Oberfähnrich (Ensign First Class), the “oldest Oberfähnrich of the Luftwaffe” as he liked to call himself. His certificate of conduct was very much substandard - in it, there was listed a curious reprimand for “illicit aeronautics”. Yet he was an amazing pilot and a deadly shot.

In total, Marseille had scored 158 aerial victories in 382 combat missions. All had been scored in the western theatre and 156 of them had been fighters. He was tempestuous, unruly and temperamental and as such was greatly loved by the ladies where his ravishing good looks and fame often allowed him to successfully engage in extracurricular activities. He was celebrated as the world’s greatest fighter pilot, and in the desert competing in fame only with Erwin Rommel, the Desert Fox himself. German newspapers and magazines reported about him as if he was a movie star, trying hard, and often failing, to keep a noble undertone. His victories in the air



were counted and celebrated like the goals of a professional football player. He was the darling of the German propaganda machine which crowned him with the title: “Star of Africa”.

**An Unruly Spirit**

Hans-Joachim Marseille was the kind of character National Socialist Party schools of the time would not have tolerated. There was no deference, no blind obedience and without a war he would sooner or later have run into trouble with the government, starting with his unkempt hairstyle, and most probably ending with a direct confrontation with military or party bureaucracy.

After finishing his service in the Reichs Labour Service, Marseille joined the Luftwaffe on 7 November 1938, as a Fahnenjunker (officer candidate) starting his basic military training in Quedlinburg before transferring to the air war school in Fürstenfeldbruck to begin his pilot training. It was the start of a legendary career, and also that of a long list of breaches of military discipline. His first escapade occurred shortly after his first solo flight in summer 1939. Being bored by having to fly a simple aerodrome traffic circuit, he broke formation and launched his Fw 56 trainer into an imaginary dogfight, weaving and >>

**RIGHT**

*Marseille readies to board 'Yellow 14' for another sortie.*







**RIGHT**

Armourers clean through the barrel of one of the cannons from Marseille's Me 109, which can be seen in the background. Marseille was renowned for shooting down his victims with a minimum expenditure of ammunition.

zig zagging before doing a dangerous low-pass over the runway. A severe break of flight regulations, and more than enough reason for his first severe reprimand, he was taken off flying duties and his promotion to Gefreiter was postponed.

*"Jochen certainly wasn't a soldiering type. We all rated him as a bit of a windy character. If he was noticed, flying aside, it was usually in a negative way. Consequently he was often ordered to stay on base while everyone else went on weekend leave. When that happened he usually left me a note which said, "Went out. You take my chores", which I always did. One could not be angry with or refuse him."* - Werner Schröder

Another episode, of a more serious kind, happened during a cross-country flight. Feeling the urge to relieve himself he landed his 109 on a motorway between Magdeburg and Braunschweig. Having done what was necessary behind a tree, some farmers came to enquire if he needed assistance. Yet by the time they arrived Marseille was already back in the cockpit and the farmers were blown off their feet by the slipstream of his starting fighter plane. The infuriated farmers reported the matter to the local authorities, and Marseille was again suspended from flying and another severe reprimand was entered into his records. Nevertheless, his flying skills were excellent and after finishing his training he was sent to the Channel front on 10 August 1940 where he was assigned to I. Jagd/Lehrgeschwader 2 to begin operations over Britain holding the rank of Oberfähnrich.



**Battle Of Britain**

On 24 August 1940, he scored his first victory when he shot down a Spitfire after a long dogfight lasting more than 4 minutes. Yet there was little praise for this feat. By engaging in single combat with his enemy, Marseille had abandoned his wingman and the rest of his squadron. Another severe violation of the rules and a good reason for yet another reprimand. By the end of the Battle of Britain he had scored seven aerial victories, but had himself been shot down four times, crash landing his aircraft three times and one time baling out into the Channel. He had also been decorated with the Iron Cross, 2<sup>nd</sup> Class.

On 23 September 1940, he again broke formation to engage an enemy aircraft alone. His aircraft was damaged by enemy fire (possibly by the British

fighter ace, Robert Stanford Tuck) forcing Marseille to bail-out over the channel. When he returned to base he learned that his Staffelführer, Adolf Buhl, had been shot down and killed during the mission. He was punished with a severe reprimand and three days of light arrest. Disliked and classed as "untrustworthy", he was assigned to IV./Jagdgeschwader 52 which was commanded by another legendary German ace, Johannes Steinhoff. The ace didn't think much of the young, rash, pilot either and also considered him to be a liability. As punishment for "insubordination", womanising, and partying up to the point of being unfit to fly, he was transferred to Jagdgeschwader 27 on 21 January 1941.

Added to his seven aerial victories he had accumulated one severe

**RIGHT**

The victor with one of his spoils, a downed Hurricane.





reprimand, three days of light arrest and five days confinement.

### The Star Of Africa

On joining JG27, he was assigned to the third Staffel under the command of Hauptmann Gerhard Homuth, with whom Marseille very quickly clashed. Homuth stood no nonsense from the young cadet, and on one occasion, when he refused to assign a combat mission to Marseille, the future ace took off and strafed the ground close to Homuth's tent. It was an action for which he was lucky not to have been court-martialled. In April, JG27 transferred to North Africa and only a day after its arrival in the new theatre of war, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Staffel, to which Marseille had been assigned, took off for its first combat sortie during which Marseille managed to shoot down a Hurricane. A sour victory, as his 109 was riddled with the machine gun bullets of a second Hurricane which forced Marseille to crash land his machine. He was unharmed, even although more than 30 bullets had smashed into the cockpit of his Messerschmitt.

Flight discipline was still alien to Marseille, and on 21 April 1941, he broke formation again to engage a lone Bristol Blenheim. Shooting it down in flames and watching it crash into the sea off Tobruk, he rejoined formation but was

**RIGHT**  
Marseille poses against the rudder of his Me109, marked with 48 victory bars.



**RIGHT**  
'Mathias', a South African POW, became Marseille's batman. An unlikely scenario within the Third Reich, the pair became devoted comrades and very protective of each other.

again punished for the breach of flight regulations. Homuth continually lectured the young pilot about his lack of discipline, and eventually referred him to the Gruppenkommandeur, Eduard Neumann, who could see the pilot's potential and decided to act as his mentor. It was a fundamental step in setting Marseille on the right track and releasing the full potential of his combat skill.

### Balked Against Nazi Policy

After his 13<sup>th</sup> victory, Marseille was finally promoted to Leutnant. It was a rank that came with certain privileges, one of which was the right to choose a batman. He had already befriended a black South African Army POW, Corporal Mathew Letulu, nicknamed Mathias, who had been doing manual labour on

the airfield. Marseille chose him to do the job, rather than to allow him to be sent to a POW camp in Europe. He and Mathias became inseparable, and the young ace was constantly concerned how Mathias would be treated by other units of the Wehrmacht. With his rising kill tally, he feared that he might be transferred out of JG27, losing Mathias in the process. "Where I go, Mathias goes", he used to say, and he managed to secure promises from his senior commander, Neumann, that if anything should happen to him then Mathias was to be kept with the unit.

By openly befriending a black man, Hans-Joachim Marseille baulked against the Nazi policies of racial segregation and Mathias >>



**BELOW**  
Marseille inspects one of his claims, a Hurricane, with a member of the indigenous population.





remained with JG27 until the end of the war and attended post-war reunions right up until his death in 1984. On 22 November 1941, Marseille scored his first multiple victory in a single combat mission. 3<sup>rd</sup> Staffel engaged 16 British Hurricanes, which immediately formed a defensive

with his complete lack of fear, and his willingness to engage, this turned him into the deadliest adversary. The low ammunition expenditure he needed to achieve a victory became legendary. On average, he spent 15-30 rounds to bring down an enemy aircraft. His skill to quickly score one victory

the German forces and he was duly decorated with the Swords to the Knights Cross with Oakleaves and a propaganda tour through the Reich followed.

Marseilles had long since turned into an icon of the German youth, something that the Reichs Minister of Propaganda, Josef Göbbels, was happy to support. On the journey back to Africa, he was invited for a stay in Italy where he was decorated with the Golden Italian Bravery Medal by Mussolini. Only two other German servicemen were decorated with it, and even Erwin Rommel himself only received the silver grade! By then, he was known by many names. Officially, his comrades called him "Chef" (boss), his radio call sign was "Elbe 1", Rommel called him "Seille" as he thought that "Marseille" sounded much too French. The Desert Eagle (Wüsten Adler), another nickname, scored another 10 victories on the first day after his return to the front.

**RIGHT**

Marseille, left, with the trusted 'Mathias' on the right. 'Mathias' attended JG 27 reunions right up until his death in 1984.



**“Marseille was extremely handsome. A gifted pilot, but also very unreliable. He had girls everywhere. They kept him so busy and sometimes he was so worn out that he had to be grounded. He often had an irresponsible way of conducting his military duties which was one of the main reasons I had to fire him. Yet he had irresistible charm.” - Johannes Steinhoff**

**RIGHT**

Field Marshal Albert Kesselring.

circle to be able to cover one another with their fire. Marseille again broke formation and climbed towards the sun, then turned his 109 around and dived right into the so-called Lufbery-Circle. Attacking with the sun now in his back, he shot two Hurricanes out of the formation before initiating another climb into the sun. Realising that they were facing only one enemy the British broke formation to engage their German attacker.

Again, Marseille managed to shoot down a Hurricane - this time in a frontal pass. Now, the rest of the Staffel finally engaged and a wild dogfight ensued in which Marseille managed to shoot down two more Hurricanes while the rest of the Staffel defeated another three. On 2 December, 1941, after his 33<sup>rd</sup> aerial victory, Marseille was awarded the German Cross in Gold from the hand of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring.

**Knights Cross**

From then on, Marseilles victory tally skyrocketed. Only two weeks later the rudder of his Bf-109 F "Yellow 14" was decorated with 44 victory bars. Marseille had superior stereopsis and was a masterful shot. Coupled

after another gave his wingman, Rainer Pöttgen, the nickname of "the flying calculator". On 22 February, 1942, Marseille was decorated with the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross, received a promotion to Oberleutnant and was given command of 3<sup>rd</sup> Staffel.

By then, he was known as the "Wüstenstern", the Desert Star, a nickname the German propaganda machine changed to "The Star of Africa". On 3 June, 1942, he was credited with six kills in 11 minutes against nine Mk IIB Tomahawks of 5 Sqn, SAAF. Three of his adversaries had been aces. Three days later he was decorated with the Oakleaves to the Knights Cross for his 75<sup>th</sup> victory. When he scored six kills in seven minutes over Gambut on 17 June 1942, he became the 11<sup>th</sup> pilot of the Luftwaffe to score 100 kills. The promotion that followed turned him into the youngest Hauptmann in







**RIGHT**

*The strain of combat is starting to show on the face of Hans-Joachim Marseille in the Western Desert.*



**RIGHT**

*Marseille surveys his unit's desert landing strip.*



**RIGHT MIDDLE**

*Marseille at work on admin tasks in his tent in the Western Desert.*



On 1 September, he again wrote history when he claimed 17 kills in only 4 sorties over El Taqua, Alam Halfa and Deir el Raghat. This was the most aircraft from Western Allied air forces shot down by a single pilot in one day. For this, he was awarded Diamonds to the Knights Cross. The 17 aircraft shot down included eight in 10 minutes; a feat for which a local squadron of the Regia Aeronautica

presented him with a VW Kübelwagen onto which the Italians had painted the name "Otto" (Italian: Otto=Eight). By then, Marseille barely spoke and became more and more morose. He began having nightmares, and became a persistent sleepwalker - symptoms that would now be classed as signs for PTSD. By then, the massive materiel superiority of the Allies began to tell and the strain

placed on the outnumbered German pilots was now severe. In September 1942, German fighter units in North Africa could field 112 (65 serviceable) aircraft against some 800 Allied machines. Marseille was becoming physically exhausted by the heated pace of combat.

After his last dogfight on 26 September 1942, Marseille was reportedly on the verge of collapse after a 15-minute battle with a formation of Spitfires. During the battle he scored his final seven victories, raising his total to 158. His final opponent, probably Pilot Officer Turvey, who baled out of his Spitfire VC, BR494, was also his toughest. Upon landing, sweaty and visibly shaken, Marseille remarked: "He was the best one so far. He nearly got me".

### **In Retrospect**

A lot has been written in past decades about Marseille's exploits in the air and on the ground. Recently, the debate about him has been enriched by questions about his political views and personal motivations. It wasn't his doing that the German propaganda machine turned him into a new Siegfried, a flying >>





## The General Of Fighter Pilots Remembers

During the author's encounter with Adolf Galland, he related an anecdote about Marseille. In 1942, Galland visited Jagdgeschwader 27 in Africa where he also met Hans-Joachim Marseille. He remembered that the road leading to the airfield was covered with signs pointing towards the base of "The World's Best Fighter Squadron" and other humorous slogans. It was a sign of the great morale and self-esteem JG27 enjoyed in those days. After talking to Marseille in his tent, and having a number of cigars and a drinking bout that lasted until late in the night, Galland told Marseille that a vital bodily function forced him to visit a certain location in private. Marseille handed a spade to Galland and told him: "Leave the tent, 60 paces into this direction, then turn right and you will find the spot after another 30 paces". Galland did as he was told, then returned and spent the night on the base of JG27. When he woke and prepared to leave he found a new set of signposts with arrows pointing away from Marseille's tent down the route Galland had taken the previous night. Galland followed the signs until reaching the final one, which showed an arrow pointing downwards and a note reading "Here, at this very spot, on 22 September 1942, the General of Fighter Pilots followed a call of nature".

**ABOVE**  
The Kubelwagen 'Otto' given to Marseille by the Italians.

**RIGHT**  
The front cover of the German magazine 'Der Adler' which featured Marseille describing one of his combats.

incarnation of the Germanic hero of old. In many ways, his 'heroism', if one has to use that word, was sparked by his rebellious attitude. This was one of the chances granted to the young men of his generation. The most efficient way to achieve some kind of personal freedom was to be better, to achieve and accomplish more than the watchdogs; the always present supervisors with their ideological bullwhips.

Marseille had soon learned what many highly decorated German combat soldiers had learned as well. One could avoid being caged in, by having one's chest and (in the best case) one's neck covered and hung with medals. This created room for personal freedom, an open or careless word now and then, the chance to wear one's hair long, to listen to Jazz music, even to speak a critical word or make a joke about the government and state. These were freedoms for which anyone else would have most likely paid with his own freedom, possibly even with his life.



Those weren't great freedoms, and they often had to be paid for with an ultimate and terrible price. But, in those days, it was a little freedom which counted for a lot.

Maybe, this is something we should think of when we talk about or consider men like Hans-Joachim Marseille? ☺

**RIGHT**  
The memorial to Marseille which was erected on the spot where he was killed.

