



THE AXIS'S WARTIME AIR LINKS

# Kommando Japan

In the third and final part of his series on the efforts — or lack thereof — of the Axis forces to establish viable strategic air-transport routes between the three nations, **RAY FLUDE** turns his attention to Germany, which squandered its opportunities to strengthen its ties to Japan through indecision, delay and a complete lack of understanding of its ally's position

**D**EUTSCHE LUFT HANSA (DLH) was founded in 1926 by the amalgamation of two smaller concerns; Junkers Luftverkehr AG and Deutscher Aero Lloyd AG. As well as developing domestic routes, the new airline looked beyond Germany and Europe by establishing a subsidiary in South America and developing a route to the Far East. The first part of the latter involved flying from Berlin to Moscow and then on to Irkutsk in Siberia. The journey on to Manchouli, on the Manchurian border, used a part of the Trans-Siberian Railway, and from Manchouli to Peking and Shanghai was handled by the Eurasia Aviation Corporation, a subsidiary created in 1930, with the Chinese government providing two thirds of the capital and DLH providing the aircraft and technical assistance.

The Berlin—Peking air route operated only until 1933, before diplomatic problems between the Soviet Union and China brought it to a halt, but deliveries of the aircraft from Germany to the Far East for Eurasia had opened the door to the possibility of linking the European, Middle East and Far East routes.

## The von Gablenz expeditions

In 1933 the airline, renamed Lufthansa, continued to explore extending its route network to the Far East. One possibility was a route through Afghanistan using a strip of territory which had been established by various agreements in the 19th Century as a buffer zone between the Russian Empire and British India. By following this route through the “Wakhan Corridor”, as it came to be known, it was possible to arrive in China without

infringing either British Indian or Soviet air space. In 1936, following pressure from Hiroshi Ōshima, at that time Japan's Military Attaché in Berlin, a German team set out to investigate the possibility of an air route from Kabul in Afghanistan across the Pamir mountains and into China.<sup>1</sup>

This expedition was led by *Kapitän* Carl August von Gablenz, a soldier who became a pilot after being wounded in the First World War, a leading figure in the development of commercial air transport in Germany and later Chief Executive of Lufthansa. The planned flight was to cross barely mapped territory without the use of any external navigational aids. The team left Kabul in Junkers Ju 52/3m D-ANOY on August 24, 1937, heading for Xi'an and travelling through the Wakhan Corridor at 18,000ft (5,500m) between the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush. The expedition very nearly reached Soochow (Suzhou) in eastern China but ran short of fuel.

The intrepid crew took off from Xi'an on the return journey and, after a forced landing owing to engine problems, became caught up in fighting between rival Chinese warlords at Lob Bazar near Chōtan. After being taken captive for a month, the crew was released and allowed to return to Kabul. The aviators were hailed as heroes on their eventual return to Berlin in October.<sup>2</sup>

Building on this success, Lufthansa opened a mail and freight route to Baghdad in Iraq on October 29, 1937, which, on April 1 the following year, was extended to Tehran in Iran and on to Kabul, in order to be ready to link to China by the direct route. The route from Kabul into China through the Wakhan Corridor required a 2,000-mile (3,200km) flight from Kabul to Pao Tow

(Bautou) in northern China. It was by far the shortest and most direct of all the routes available, but its accessibility depended on the political situation in Afghanistan. The Soviets became suspicious of these developments and this, coupled with unrest in China, forced Lufthansa to end the route at Kabul.

Some negotiation took place with Britain over routes across India in the late 1930s; and beginning on April 22, 1939, a survey flight, again led by von Gablenz, flew from Baghdad down the Persian Gulf and across India to Bangkok in Thailand using a route which had been agreed with Britain. A full Lufthansa commercial passenger service to Bangkok opened on July 25 that year using Junkers Ju 52/3ms, but only three flights were made before the outbreak of war.<sup>3</sup>

To show what was technically possible, on November 28, 1938, civilian Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor D-ACON, under the command of Kapt Alfred Henke, had flown via Basra in Iraq, Karachi in India and Hanoi in French Indochina (Vietnam) to Tokyo in 42 flying hours. This was intended to be part of a round-the-world flight, but the American government would not allow the aircraft to return to Europe across the USA.

### Wartime extension

The drive to extend Germany's route network to the Far East continued after the outbreak of war, and in January 1942, when the Military Agreement was signed by all three Axis powers, there was some commitment to creating air services between the three. Goering had weakened the wording of this commitment during the negotiations, however, and maintained "that the proposed restoration of an air-force link between Germany, Italy and Japan is not possible because the range of available or planned aircraft is inadequate".<sup>4</sup>

VIA LENNART ANDERSSON



**ABOVE** Former First World War pilot Carl August von Gablenz was one of Germany's most distinguished airmen, having joined Junkers Luftverkehr in 1924 before going on to become the newly formed Deutsche Luft Hansa's first Flight Operations Manager and completing numerous pioneering flights in the 1930s.

**BELOW** Eighth from the right, von Gablenz stands beside the Junkers Ju 52/3m, D-ANOY, named Rudolf von Thüna, in which he undertook the August 1937 flight from Kabul to eastern China and back. Sadly, von Gablenz was killed flying a French-built Siebel Si 204 transport aircraft in Germany in August 1942.



*The first Blohm und Voss Bv 222 prototype, designated Bv222 V1 and given the civil registration D-ANTE, on the occasion of its roll-out at the company's factory in the Finkenwerder district of Hamburg, in August 1940. The six-engined flying-boat, originally designed to a Lufthansa specification for a transatlantic passenger aircraft, made its maiden flight on September 7 the same year.*



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The same month, von Gablenz, by this time Chief Executive of Lufthansa, sent a summary report to Goering which directly contradicted this argument. The report identified specific types of aircraft which would be suitable and routes which would be feasible for flights to the Far East. For landplanes, the route could leave Kirovograd (now Kropyvnytskyi) in Ukraine or Smolensk in western Russia, or Kemi in Finland, and arrive at either Tsitsihar (Qiqihar) in Manchuria or Pao Tow. A feasible seaplane route could run from Kirkenes in north-eastern Norway to Dairen (now Dalian) in eastern China or on to Tokyo.

The suitable aircraft specified were the four-engined Fw 200 Condor for the landplane routes and the six-engined Blohm und Voss Bv 222 Wiking flying-boat for the seaplane route. Both were originally designed as civil aircraft for long-distance commercial flights. The Condor would need to overload with fuel, raising its standard 39,200lb (17,780kg) take-off weight to 51,520lb (23,370kg), but this could be managed. The Bv 222

would need a 5,600lb (2,540kg) overload to fly direct to Tokyo. In its summary, von Gablenz's report states categorically that "an air service between Europe and Japan is possible with presently available equipment . . . the best route for an air service between Europe and Japan is Kirkenes to Dairen or Tokyo using the Bv 222".<sup>5</sup>

On January 29, 1942, a further detailed report, comprising 11 closely-typed pages, was produced by Lufthansa backing up this summary. Careful thought had been given to the insulation and heating of the cockpit and crew accommodation of the Bv 222 and the provision of facilities for cooking and eating meals on the long flight. The BMW 323 Fafnir radial engines required major overhaul after 30–40hr of flight, and, as the flight to the Far East would take 25–30hr, this meant that facilities for engine replacement and spare engines would have to be made available in Japan. Despite these issues, Lufthansa, with its extensive pre-war experience, was confident that an air service was possible by following a route

***Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor D-ACON was used to make several high-profile long-distance flights, including the first non-stop flight of a heavier-than-air machine between Berlin and New York, where it arrived on August 11, 1938, as seen here. The same aircraft flew from Berlin to Tokyo that November, but was lost when it ditched off the coast of the Philippines on the return journey.***

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across the northern Soviet Union direct to Japan.<sup>6</sup>

Ōshima, by now Japan's Ambassador to Germany, was involved in these discussions and reported back to Tokyo on April 25, 1942, repeating the airline's proposal. The options were:

- a landplane route from northern Scandinavia to Tokyo via Tsitsihar in Manchuria: a total journey of 4,725 miles (7,620km);

- a flying-boat route from northern Scandinavia to Tokyo via southern Sakhalin in the northern Pacific, at that time governed by the Japanese as Karafuto; a journey of 4,500 miles (7,240km);

- a flying-boat route from northern Scandinavia to Tokyo direct; 4,400 miles (7,080km)

- a flying-boat route from northern Scandinavia to Tokyo via Dairen; 4,800 miles (7,720km).

All four followed a "great circle" route, the longest leg for a landplane being 3,600 miles (5,790km) and 4,400 miles for a flying-boat.<sup>7</sup> American intelligence analysts identified this as the first positive German response to Japanese initiatives about creating an air service, and noted that it mainly focused on the northern route across the Soviet Union. The favoured route, Ōshima claimed, was from Finland to Manchuria because it was the shortest route and crossed "friendly territory".

That Ōshima should have considered an air route across northern Russia to be over "friendly territory" is surprising, as any German aircraft, civil or military, flying to Japan via that route by that time would have risked interception by the Soviets or their allies, with considerable risk to the Neutrality Pact between the Soviet Union and Japan. This is clear evidence of the extent to which Ōshima had lost touch with the concerns of the Japanese government and become closer to understanding and accepting the German perspective. His personal view had always been that the Soviet Union was the enemy Japan should be fighting, and he had worked long and hard during the 1930s to draw Germany into an active alliance with Japan against the Soviets.

### **A southern alternative**

The Japanese government, of course, could not accept the route across the northern Soviet Union. The still-keen von Gablenz was willing to consider a southern route, but any proposals would require a decision at the highest level by Hitler and Goering; von Gablenz confirmed that he would prefer that the flights be undertaken by the Bv 222 on a southern flying-boat route via Rangoon in Burma and Singapore.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of June 1942 Ōshima could report to Tokyo that Lufthansa had been considering the proposals and "[that it] hoped very much that the southern route would be put into operation. [It] felt [it] had sufficient talent for making this



**ABOVE** Hiroshi Ōshima was appointed Japan's Military Attaché in Berlin in 1934, and ambassador to Berlin in 1938. After a return to Japan in 1939, he returned to Berlin as ambassador in February 1941. An unwitting rich source of Allied intelligence, Ōshima's detailed despatches were regularly intercepted.

a real success". Lufthansa had thought through how it would proceed. Ōshima continued: "In order to avoid the strong anti-aircraft positions in Mosul [in Iraq] for the protection of the oilfields, [the aircraft] would start from the island of Rhodes [in the Dodecanese, at that time an Italian possession], fly over the Arabian desert, fly very high across India [at night] and arrive at Rangoon . . . [a journey of] over 7,300km [4,540 miles], requiring 24–25hr". But no decision was forthcoming from the Japanese High Command.

Another example of the difficulty of getting a decision made within the Nazi hierarchy manifested itself when, in July 1942, the Japanese leadership requested that a German flight be made to Japan to bring a high-ranking delegation to Berlin. The response was surprisingly guarded. Concern had begun to surface in Berlin that the delegation would be looking to persuade the Germans to propose an armistice on the Eastern Front, thereby releasing German forces for the war against Britain and America. Hitler could not accept this. Anxiety was also expressed about what would happen if high-ranking Japanese military and political figures were killed in a German aircraft.

Over the next two months the situation became increasingly chaotic. Despite German Foreign



**ABOVE LEFT** Erhard Milch was responsible for German aircraft production during the war, and proved to be a forthright figure within the German High Command. **ABOVE MIDDLE** Highly experienced long-distance pilot Rudolf Mayr. **ABOVE RIGHT** Walter Blume would have joined Mayr on the proposed Far East Ju 290A-9 flights.

Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop's doubts about the idea, Lufthansa and *Generalfeldmarschall* Erhard Milch, the airline's first managing director and now Germany's Air Inspector General, continued discussions about using the Bv 222 for flights to Japan. Endurance test flights were made during September 5–12, 1942, one lasting more than 22hr, long enough for the flight to Japan. The pilots were Rudolf Mayr and Walter Blume.

Rumours within German and Italian diplomatic circles in Japan suggested that a flight was at hand. But by the end of September 1942 it was clear that von Ribbentrop and Hitler had at last agreed that although such a delegation would be welcomed in principle, it was too dangerous to use aircraft, and that Goering had been adamant that he could not guarantee the reliability of the aircraft.

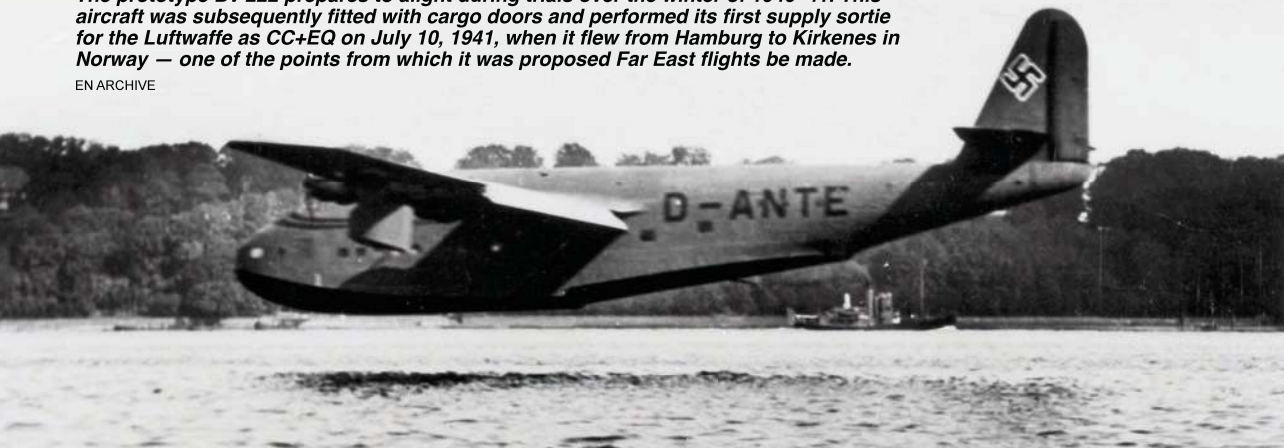
### Lack of availability

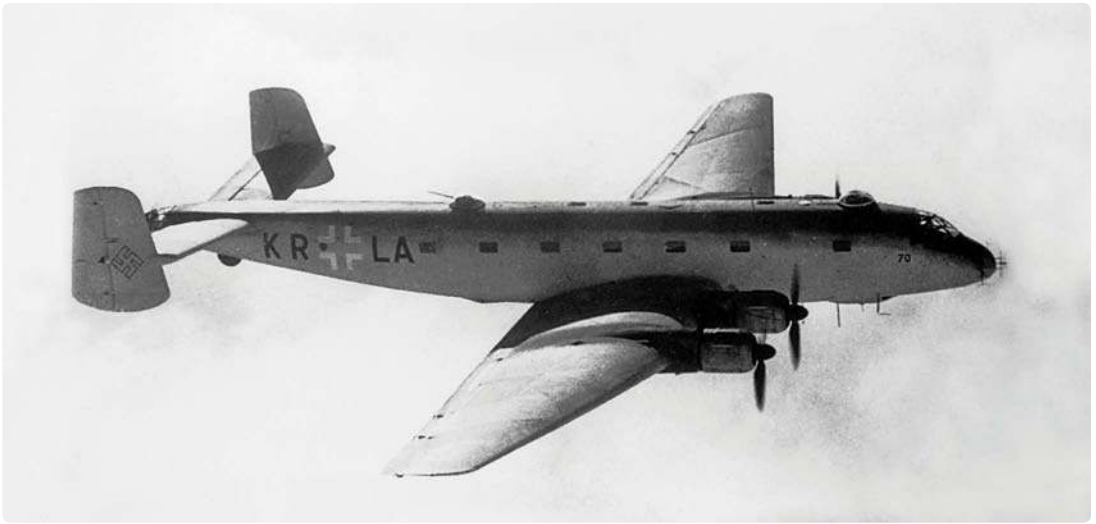
By April 1943 Goering and the Luftwaffe were denying any requests for flights to Japan by insisting that the few long-range aircraft available were required for what was considered a more important strategic purpose. The Bv 222 and the new four-engined Junkers Ju 290 would be

needed to back up the Fw 200s supporting the *Kriegsmarine's* U-boats in the Atlantic. There was no capacity to spare for what were seen as one-off propaganda flights. This lack of availability was a direct result of Goering and others' opposition to the idea of building strategic four-engined bombers during the 1930s. As Goering said: "The Führer does not ask me how big my bombers are, but how many there are".<sup>9</sup> Only 13 Bv 222s and fewer than 50 Junkers Ju 290s were built during the war. The latter had been developed as a private venture by Junkers and was only later adopted by the Luftwaffe when it proved successful.

By late 1943 Germany's supplies of wolframite, the ore from which tungsten (vital for hardening machine-tools) was obtained, were drying up. In Europe the sources were Spain and Portugal, both neutral countries, but supplies were far from reliable and becoming increasingly expensive. Germany had been buying up mines to try to guarantee deliveries, but Britain was winning the battle to buy access to these supplies. The other source was China, but Japan's control over these resources was uncertain and its own demands also had to be met. By the end of 1943 the

*The prototype Bv 222 prepares to alight during trials over the winter of 1940–41. This aircraft was subsequently fitted with cargo doors and performed its first supply sortie for the Luftwaffe as CC+EQ on July 10, 1941, when it flew from Hamburg to Kirkenes in Norway — one of the points from which it was proposed Far East flights be made.*





**ABOVE** *Junkers Ju 290A-5 WNr 0170, code KR+LA, was the first of 11 maritime reconnaissance versions built, and was reportedly the machine used by Rudolf Mayr to practise take-offs at high overload weights in February 1944. The Far East flights would have used a specially-modified long-range variant, the A-9, with reduced armament.*

blockade-runners (surface ships and submarines) linking Germany and Japan were coming under increasing pressure from Allied forces, assisted by their codebreakers. The use of surface ships to carry such minerals was stopped on January 19, 1944, and the total carried by submarines overall amounted to less than the cargo of one ship.

The continuing need after January 1944 to transport key people to Japan, in addition to the pressing need for raw materials, especially wolframite, reawakened the German interest in developing an air link. The focus shifted to two possible routes: a polar route across the Arctic Ocean and Bering Strait, and a route from central Europe to Pao Tow. The Luftwaffe, for the first time, took a positive interest in carrying its new air attaché and a team of advisers to Japan, and bringing back wolframite across the northern route, while Lufthansa continued its long-running and eventually unsuccessful discussions with the Japanese about ways to exploit the central route.

Since October 1943 pilot Rudolf Mayr had increasingly taken charge of long-distance Ju 290 flights. He had enjoyed a highly successful career as a long-distance and endurance specialist, with experience of Antarctic and Arctic flying. Under his leadership, activity had been slowly coming together on the Luftwaffe side to support flights over the northern route. Enquiries had been made by the German air attaché in Tokyo, Wolfgang von Gronau, in the Japanese capital at the end of 1943 about the availability of emergency airfields at Harbin in Manchuria, Hailar in north-eastern Inner Mongolia and Tsitsihar.<sup>10</sup> This caused some concern among the Japanese, because von Gronau “has not let us see their objectives”, and the choice of airfields suggested that flights would be made over Soviet territory.

In January 1944 Heinz Braun, another key

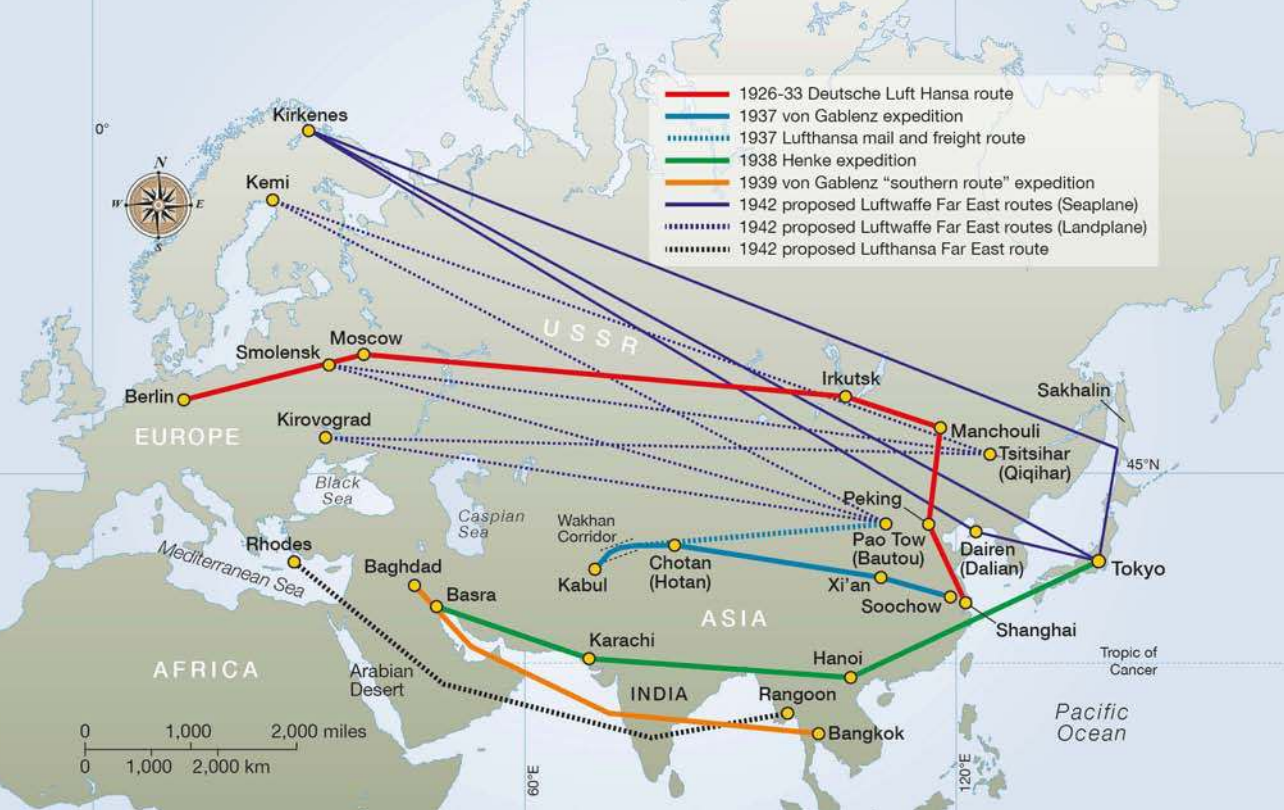
pilot experienced in the use of heavy long-range aircraft, moved from *Fernaufklärungsgruppe 5* (Long-distance Reconnaissance Group 5 — FAGr.5) in western France to the Luftwaffe’s *Erprobungsstelle* — test centre — at Rechlin in north-east Germany, where he began logging entries under the heading “*Kommando Japan*” in his logbook.<sup>11</sup> During January 7–17, 1944, Braun recorded a series of Ju 52/3m flights made with a view to establishing a suitable base for flights to Japan. As a result of these investigations, Nautsi in far northern Finland was selected.

Three new very-long-range Ju 290A-9s, the only examples of this variant built, were to be used for the flights to the Far East. The flight commanders were to be Braun, Mayr and Blume. The Luftwaffe had drawn together the team which had flown endurance tests in the Bv 222 in 1942, and which had considerable collective experience with large multi-engined aircraft. The aim of the flights was to fly to Manchuria in order to bring back wolframite, and it was estimated that a load of 4,480lb (2,030kg) could be carried on each trip. The three Ju 290A-9s were built to order during January, February and March 1944 at Dessau and were ready on February 18 and 25 and March 14.<sup>12</sup>

## Preparations

In early February 1944 Mayr practised taking off at high gross weights using a Ju 290A-5 retained by Junkers for testing purposes. The take-off weight was boosted to 45,720kg (100,800lb), as against a normal weight of 41,655kg (91,840lb). This was practice for the long-distance flight to the Far East, for which it would be necessary to take off with a substantial overload of fuel.

During his interrogation by Allied intelligence services in June 1945, the Luftwaffe’s *General der Flieger*, Ulrich Kessler, explained that if these



MAP BY MAGGIE NELSON

flights had gone ahead, there would have been a German-Japanese exchange, with Germany sending information, designs and models of new technical developments to Japan in return for scarce materials such as antimony and tungsten.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside the plan to carry such materials back from the Far East, one of the points for discussion from early 1944 was the sending of Kessler himself and 16 others to Tokyo to advise on air defence, and for Kessler (**RIGHT**) to replace von Gronau as air attaché, who would then travel back to Germany on the return flight.<sup>14</sup> In May 1944 these proposals were noted by Allied codebreakers, who identified the route via the Arctic Ocean and Bering Strait as the first practical proposal by Germany of a northern route that did not infringe Soviet air space.<sup>15</sup>

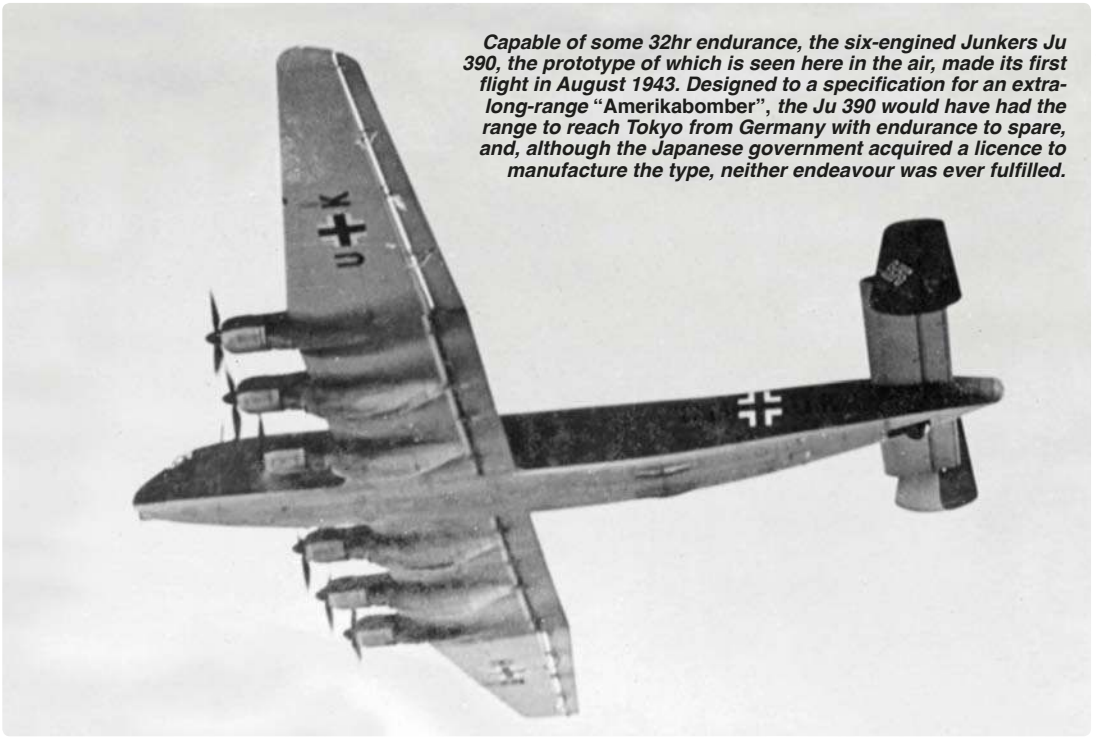
The Japanese, meanwhile, were still worried about whether this would be a genuine flight over the North Pole and whether they could be certain that it would not cross Soviet territory. They did not trust the Germans to respect their wishes and assumed that the flights would, despite all assurances, take a short-cut south over Siberia. Allied intelligence reports stated: "It is expected that a direct route to Japan across East Siberia will be taken, inasmuch as the route proposed by Germany is fairly circuitous. We are therefore proceeding with a careful study of the matter, in view of the present extremely delicate relations between Japan and Russia".<sup>16</sup>



American intelligence analysts also suggested that the German enquiries in December 1943 about emergency landing sites in Manchuria had led the Japanese to suspect that there might be plans for a diversion across Soviet territory.

### Talking at cross-purposes

The Luftwaffe's plans for Far East flights were halted by Japan's concerns over the route, and the three Ju 290A-9s were transferred to KG 200.<sup>17</sup> It seems curious that the project should have got to this stage with Germany showing such scant regard for Japan's concerns over its Neutrality Pact with the Soviet Union, but it is entirely symbolic of the mutual lack of understanding displayed repeatedly throughout the war by the Axis powers. Earlier, Joachim von Ribbentrop had advised Ōshima that he could not get Goering to understand Japan's worries about flights over the USSR. Japan's position had been made clear on a number of occasions since the summer of 1942, and the Japanese had certainly become much less likely to want to precipitate a conflict with the Soviets. Kessler believed that the Luftwaffe had misunderstood Japanese concerns, and he maintained in his interrogation after VE-Day that Japan would have accepted a one-off flight, about which it could have protested officially but condoned and supported in private. He believed that Japan would have accepted this even up until the autumn of 1944, when the tone of Stalin's



*Capable of some 32hr endurance, the six-engined Junkers Ju 390, the prototype of which is seen here in the air, made its first flight in August 1943. Designed to a specification for an extra-long-range "Amerikabomber", the Ju 390 would have had the range to reach Tokyo from Germany with endurance to spare, and, although the Japanese government acquired a licence to manufacture the type, neither endeavour was ever fulfilled.*

speeches had caused the Japanese to become even more concerned about potential risks to the neutrality arrangements.

There is a plausible element in the account of the interrogation of one prisoner of war, pilot Wolf Baumgart, on March 29, 1945, in which he claimed that he had made two Ju 290 flights to Manchuria himself, and that two other flights had been completed.<sup>18</sup> Baumgart had served with FAGr.5 and obviously had some knowledge of the plans made for the Manchuria flights, which he fed into his account. The interrogator stated: "Some of his statements should be accepted with reservation, as they reflect confident exuberance". This story has been repeated many times over the years but there is no other supporting documentary evidence that these flights ever took place.

On the evidence available, it seems certain that the plan to use the Ju 290A-9s for flights to Manchuria was aborted. Pilots Mayr, Blume and, above all, Braun, would almost certainly have been involved. Researchers have had access to Braun's logbook and interviewed him, and there is no support for the idea that there was any covert continuation of the project. There would certainly have been no Japanese support for any such activity, and in some ways, the most conclusive evidence is that Kessler, the new air attaché, could not be transported to Japan by air at this time. Indeed, Kessler's response when shown the report on the Baumgart interview in June 1945 during his own interrogation by Allied intelligence was that "after making allowance for

the possibility that one section of the Luftwaffe may not be acquainted with all of the activities of another, it is quite impossible that such a flight took place, as [I] conferred with all sections which had anything to do with such flights".

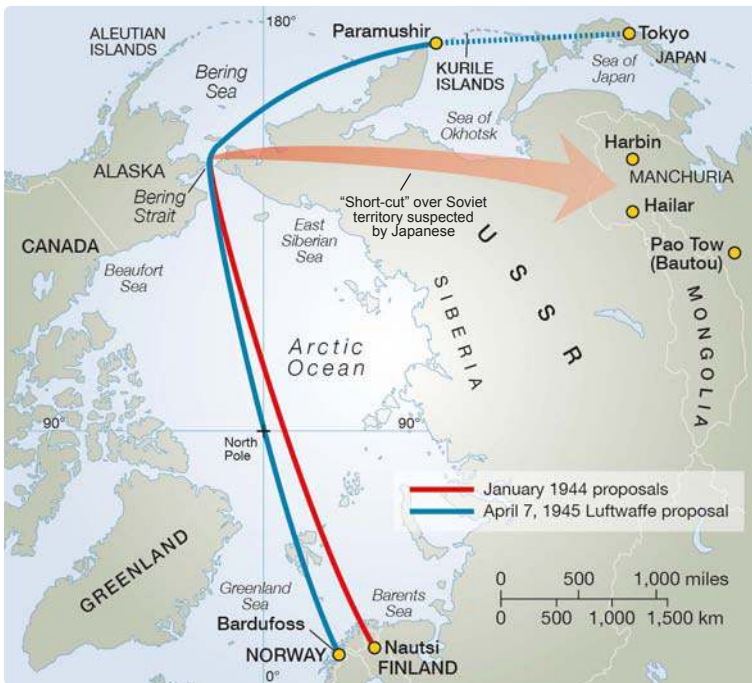
Kessler had completed a major fact-finding exercise across the Luftwaffe in preparation for his assignment to the post in Japan. He also pointed out that if such flights had already been taking place, there would have been no need for all the negotiations in which he had been engaged to try to get the Japanese to permit a flight to carry him to Japan. He identified operational expertise gained by KG 200 in long-distance flights eastwards, including as far as the Urals, but not to the Far East. All the information from these flights had been shared with him.<sup>19</sup>

Kessler, his team and other passengers eventually travelled on the last U-boat to leave Germany for Japan, *U-234*, which surrendered in mid-Atlantic in May 1945.<sup>20</sup>

### **Desperate times**

Even as the Third Reich was collapsing, the Germans were still trying desperately to get information and specialist personnel out to Japan to continue the struggle. As late as April 7, 1945, Japanese military attachés sent a "proposal for sending German scientific specialists and equipment to Japan";<sup>21</sup> and, just two days before the evacuation of Japanese attachés from Berlin ahead of the victorious Red Army, they contacted the Chiefs of Staff in Tokyo in order to request





“The navigation information provided explained that, because the route took the aircraft over the North Pole, use of the magnetic compass would be impossible, and that the flight would therefore have to take place when sun and moon were near to 90° of separation to enable navigation . . . it all proved too late . . .”

clearance for a flight for *Majorgeneral* Wolfgang von Wild, who had been Kessler’s senior aide.<sup>22</sup> They pointed out that Kessler was already travelling to Japan by submarine on a journey that would take three months and that “there is a danger of losing the opportunity of exchanging experience gained in warfare with new weapons”.

The message proposed using a modified Ju 290 which had already been worked on at Travemünde, near Lübeck, in preparation for the originally proposed Kessler flight. The aircraft would follow the great-circle route from Bardufoss in Norway, across the pole down the Bering Strait to Paramushir, one of the northernmost of the Kurile Islands. This would be a journey of 7,725km (4,800 miles); the aircraft had been improved to have a range of 9,010km (5,600 miles) at 6,100m (20,000ft). It would need a 1,000m (3,300ft) runway for landing. The crew would comprise a pilot, flight officer, engineer and radio operator and ownership of the aircraft was to be transferred to Japan. There would be no reason to cross Soviet territory, and if there were any problems the aircraft would divert to Alaska, not Russia. The message stated:

“The men to be sent are all doing their best to get together the latest information to take along . . . [important data will be on microfilm] in response to the various questions that have been asked by Japan.”

The navigation information provided explained that, because the route took the aircraft over the North Pole, use of the magnetic compass would be impossible, and that the flight would therefore have to take place when sun and moon were near

to 90° of separation to enable navigation. There were only three days in each month when this would be possible; April 28, May 20 and June 15, 1945. It all proved too late. The Germans surrendered on May 7, 1945, before the next window of opportunity occurred.

## Postscript

The Italian flight to Japan in July 1942 (see the first part of this series, *The Rome–Tokyo Express*, in *TAH24*) was therefore the only successful round-trip flight undertaken between the European and Asian parts of the Axis during the war. There were several reasons for this.

First, there was no consistent desire to develop collaborative activity between the three powers, and therefore no overarching, shared imperative to develop air services. Japan was keen to send delegations to Berlin, but these were intended to convince the Germans to negotiate a ceasefire on the Eastern Front and were not really about collaborative warfare.

Next, the decision-making process in Germany depended on the struggle to get agreement from powerful — and often feuding — factions within the hierarchy, as well as having close personal access to the Führer. Fierce inter-service rivalry in both Germany and Japan wasted precious resources and made it difficult to gain authority for projects. Furthermore, the ingrained culture within the individual Axis powers always gave priority to military and combat uses of aircraft above possible transport uses.

There were clear problems within the Axis framework from the beginning. The Germans and



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**LEFT** In 1941 German-Japanese co-operation was in its ascendancy. This poster, entitled “German-Japanese Power Struggle”, with the symbols of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan separated by an olive branch, advertised the availability of three scholarships for German students to spend a year studying in Japan. By late 1943, however, the prospect of a Germany–Japan air link seemed as remote as ever.

Japanese felt that the Italians were less reliable, less competent partners and so their efforts were not given much weight. Strong pre-war inter-service links between the Imperial Japanese Army and the Germans led Japan to expect that the Germans would deliver a flight, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Another important factor was the lack of suitable long-range aircraft developed by any of the three nations, with the result that any potential “air-bridge” projects were obliged to use civilian

passenger aircraft or those adapted for record flights for propaganda purposes, rather than establishing a viable air service. When a suitable aircraft, the Ju 290, came along, so few were built that they became the subject of interminable arguments about the priority for their use.

As a result, the Axis powers lost the opportunity to meet for high-level face-to-face discussions to negotiate strategy, plan joint operations or organise vitally important transfers of technology. The Allies found that such meetings, held frequently, helped to overcome many of the frustrations and stumbling blocks experienced by the Axis partners — at least until victory was achieved.

In contrast, no meetings of high-level Japanese and German leaders and decision-takers — political or military — ever took place. Contact was always through representatives in each capital, with no authority to implement the decisions made. There was very little chance to refresh or replace those representatives, and those who happened to be in Japan or in Europe at the outbreak of the war remained there for the duration, to become increasingly out of touch with their country’s policy and less able to communicate it effectively. Indeed, the messages sent in both directions to inform and report on those decisions provided a rich source of intelligence for the Allies’ codebreakers.



1 Chapman, John, *The Origin and Development of German and Japanese Military Collaboration 1936–45*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Oxford 1967, p571

2 Walters, Brian, *Junkers: A Pioneer in Aviation*, Chalfont, 1997, p83. Includes photograph of von Gablenz

3 Davies, R.E.G., *A History of the World’s Airlines*, Oxford University Press, 1964 (1983 edition)

4 Chapman, John, ed *The Price of Admiralty: The War Diary of the German Naval Attaché in Japan 1939–1943*, University of Sussex Printing Unit, 1982, p940

5 Lufthansa Archives, Cologne. Report dated January 5, 1942, to be sent to “Herr Reichsminister der Luftfahrt u. Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe”. Title — *Möglichkeiten einer Flugverbindung Europa–Japan*; three pages with a table of details for each of the three routes. Report signed by von Gablenz. From file on Europe/Far East activity and correspondence with Herr Kaumann in Tokyo

6 Ibid. Report dated January 29, 1942. Title — *Luftverkehr Europa–Japan. Untersuchung der technischen Möglichkeiten*; ten pages plus table of technical details for landplane and seaplane over the three routes

7 USA National Archives, Washington DC, Record Group 457, Japanese diplomatic messages intercepted and decoded. SRDJ 22020-23 Japanese diplomatic telegram, No 551, April 25, 1942. Also Record group 457 MAGIC Summaries — daily summaries of significant Japanese messages intercepted and decoded. SRS May 1, 1942

8 Ibid SRDJ 24232 diplomatic telegram, Berlin to Tokyo, No 813, June 25, 1942

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