

# DEFENDER OF THE REICH

## WW II as seen by a Luftwaffe Ace

BY J. RICHARD SMITH AND EDDIE J. CREEK

*Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring was in rare form, his eyes full of fire as he faced one of the better known of Germany's aces, Oberst Walther Dahl.

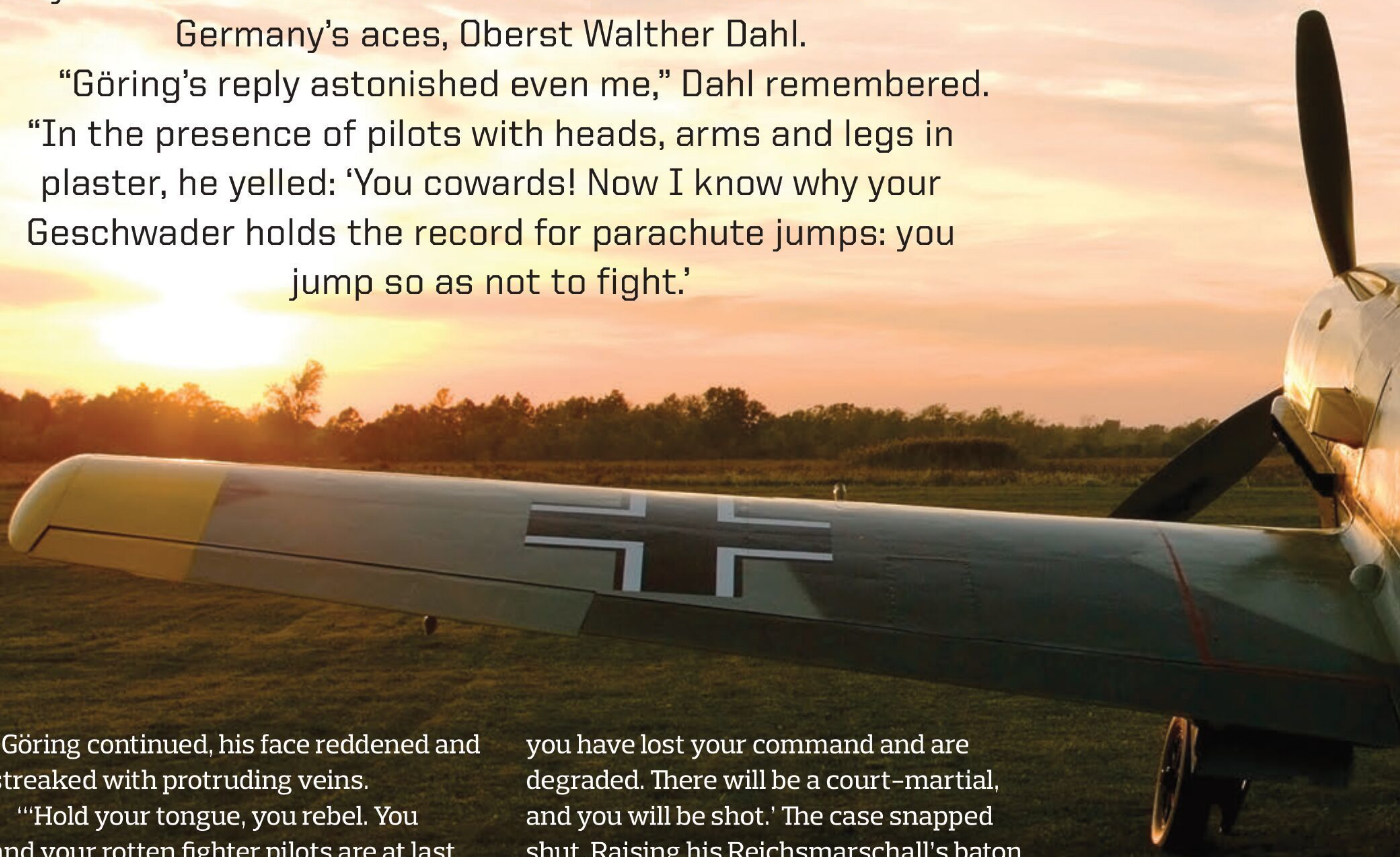
"Göring's reply astonished even me," Dahl remembered. "In the presence of pilots with heads, arms and legs in plaster, he yelled: 'You cowards! Now I know why your Geschwader holds the record for parachute jumps: you jump so as not to fight.'

"Göring continued, his face reddened and streaked with protruding veins.

"Hold your tongue, you rebel. You and your rotten fighter pilots are at last going to feel my hand. Before the sun sets tonight, I shall have you shot.' He was raving like a madman. Everyone fell silent as, turning to me once again, he said ominously: 'I came here today to give you this.' Momentarily, he opened a leather case in which the Oak Leaves glittered. 'But now I cannot. Today I must make an example. From this moment,

you have lost your command and are degraded. There will be a court-martial, and you will be shot.' The case snapped shut. Raising his Reichsmarschall's baton to the attendant officers in a stiff farewell, he climbed into his giant Mercedes and shouted: 'Away! Drive me out of this sink!'

"To be shot for cowardice—or was it mutiny? It seemed a strange reward for shooting down over 80 enemy aircraft, bailing out 15 times, being wounded three times, and having no leave, except in hospital, since the war began."



Right: Maj. Walther Dahl in a typical pose with a cigar clenched between his teeth. Around his neck he wears the *Ritterkreuz* (Knight's Cross), which he was awarded on March 11, 1944. On February 1, 1945, he was awarded the *Eichenlaub* (Oak Leaves), by which time he had scored his 100th victory and had been promoted to *Oberstleutnant* (Lieutenant-Colonel). (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection)

Below: Messerschmitt Bf 109E-3 "White 14" sits ready for flight. A combat veteran airframe, this view greeted countless *Luftwaffe* pilots prior to countless missions during WW II. (Photo by John Dibbs/ [facebook.com/theplanepicture](https://www.facebook.com/theplanepicture))



# W

Walther Dahl was born on March 27, 1916, at Lug near Bad Bergzabern, southwest of Landau on the Franco/German border. Dahl's military career began when he was 19, when he joined Infantry Regiment 119 of the German Army based at Stuttgart.

Typical of many pilots who were later to become famous, he quickly transferred to the *Luftwaffe*, which had only been revealed to the world in 1935. He was soon promoted to *Leutnant* and eventually became a flight instructor. His cherished ambition of joining an operational unit was not realized until October 1, 1940, when, as an *Oberleutnant*, he was posted to the *Geschwader Stab* (headquarters flight) of JG 3 based at Desvres in France. The Battle of Britain was almost over, and Dahl saw little operational flying until the summer of 1941 when JG 3 was transferred to Hostyn-Zamocs airfield on June 18.

Just after midnight on June 22, the *Kommodore* of JG 3, Maj. Günther Lützow, assembled his *Geschwader* at the airfield, saying: "Men, at dawn today we begin the war against the Soviet Union." For the opening assault, JG 3 was attached to the *V. Fliegerkorps*, which was part of *Luftflotte* 4 whose task was to cover the movements of Army Group South. At 2:50 a.m., Dahl took off in his Bf 109 F2, an aircraft far in advance of anything the Soviet Air Force possessed, to patrol the front line until first light. At 4 a.m., the first sortie over enemy territory was flown, Dahl escorting a formation of bombers attacking Lemberg airfield. About 30 minutes into the sortie, he shot down his first enemy aircraft, an I-16 Rata, but another Russian fighter had slipped in undetected and scored hits on the engine of his Messerschmitt. Finally, the engine cut, and he was forced to make a deadstick landing miles behind enemy lines. After a forced march of three days, a very unkempt Dahl returned to his unit.

On July 10, Dahl was transferred to Hptm. (captain) Gordon Gollob's II./JG 3 as adjutant,

claiming his second victory, another Rata, on the 16th. Eight days later, he was awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class, his *Gruppe* flying operations over all the focal points of the southern sector of the Russian front, Korowograd, Uman, Zhytomyr, Kiev, Kremenchug, Tscherkassy, Dnepropetrovsk, Nikolayev and Cherson. On September 14, Dahl claimed his tenth victory, a Polikarpov I-153 biplane, and had already received the Iron Cross First Class. Operations followed over Jochnow, Wjasma, Briansk and Orel, then, on October 3, the *Gruppe* flew its first mission over Moscow. Heavy flak over the city riddled Dahl's Messerschmitt, and he was forced to make an emergency landing on Setschinskaia airfield. A little later, II./JG 3 had moved to the Crimean Peninsula, and on October 23, Dahl shot down two MiG-1s and another I-16.

In January 1942, the *Gruppe*, now under the command of Hptm. Karl-Heinz Krahl, moved to the Mediterranean island of Sicily, operating from Sciacca and San Pietro against Malta. On April 1, Dahl, now the *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 3, claimed his





A mechanic assists Walter Dahl to strap himself into the cockpit of his Bf 109 G. Note the armor plate, which protected the pilot's head from fire from the rear, and the yellow octane triangle just forward of the fuselage *Balkenkreuz* (cross). (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection)

A lineup of Bf 109 Fs belonging to JG 53 "Pik-As" (Ace of Spades) *Geschwader* ready for delivery to the front line. The aircraft in front is ready for delivery to the 4. *Staffel* while the other two carry the yellow markings of the 6. *Staffel*. The absence of colored tail bands indicate the aircraft were to be used in the defense of the Reich against the Allied bombing. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection)



the main supply airfield for the Stalingrad airlift, Morosovskaja. Here, too, they were threatened with encirclement, and eventually, Russian T-34 tanks broke through the outer defense perimeter onto the airfield. In a daring attack, Dahl was able to destroy one of them by throwing a hand grenade into its turret. After completing 25 sorties in the Stalingrad battle, he was promoted to *Hauptmann* on March 1, 1943, and by April 17, he had shot down his 51st enemy aircraft, a LaGG-3.

As the last major German offensive in the east, Operation Zitadelle, was proceeding, the commander of III./JG 3, Maj. Wolfgang Ewald, was shot down on July 14 and taken prisoner. Dahl took over soon afterwards, but on August 3, his new *Gruppe* was relocated from Bessonwka in Russia to Münster-Handorf in Germany.

Dahl's unit now began intensive operations against the daylight raids being flown by the B-17s and B-24s of the U.S. 8th Air Force. One of the most important of these was against the Schweinfurt/Regensburg raid on August 17. Although this resulted in heavy American

losses, III./JG 3 was intercepted by Spitfires of 222 Squadron RAF, and five Bf 109s were shot down. Dahl himself had to make a belly landing when his Bf 109 G-6 suffered engine failure. On September 6, he got his revenge when he shot down two B-17s. Interception of a second U.S. raid against the Schweinfurt ball-bearing factories on October 14 proved more successful for III./JG 3. Dahl led the takeoff of his 25 Bf 109 Gs from Bad Wörishofen near Memmingen with them intercepting the bombers around 2:20 p.m. In the 20-minute action that followed, the *Gruppe* shot down 25 B-17s including two by Dahl.

Other raids followed and Dahl continued to add to his score. On January 29, 1944, he shot down two B-17s; on February 23, two B-24s and a P-38; and the next two days saw four bombers and another P-38 fall to his guns. Previously, on January 1, he had been promoted to major, and on March 11, in recognition of his 66 kills, he was awarded the Knight's Cross. On April 24, Dahl claimed two more B-17s and a P-51 on April 24, bringing his score to 71.

Major Walther Dahl seated in the cockpit of a Fw 190 A-8 "Blue 13" in December 1944 at Jüterbog Airfield south of Berlin. At this time, he was being filmed for propaganda to be shown on the weekly news bulletin "Deutsche Wochenschau" in German cinemas. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection)



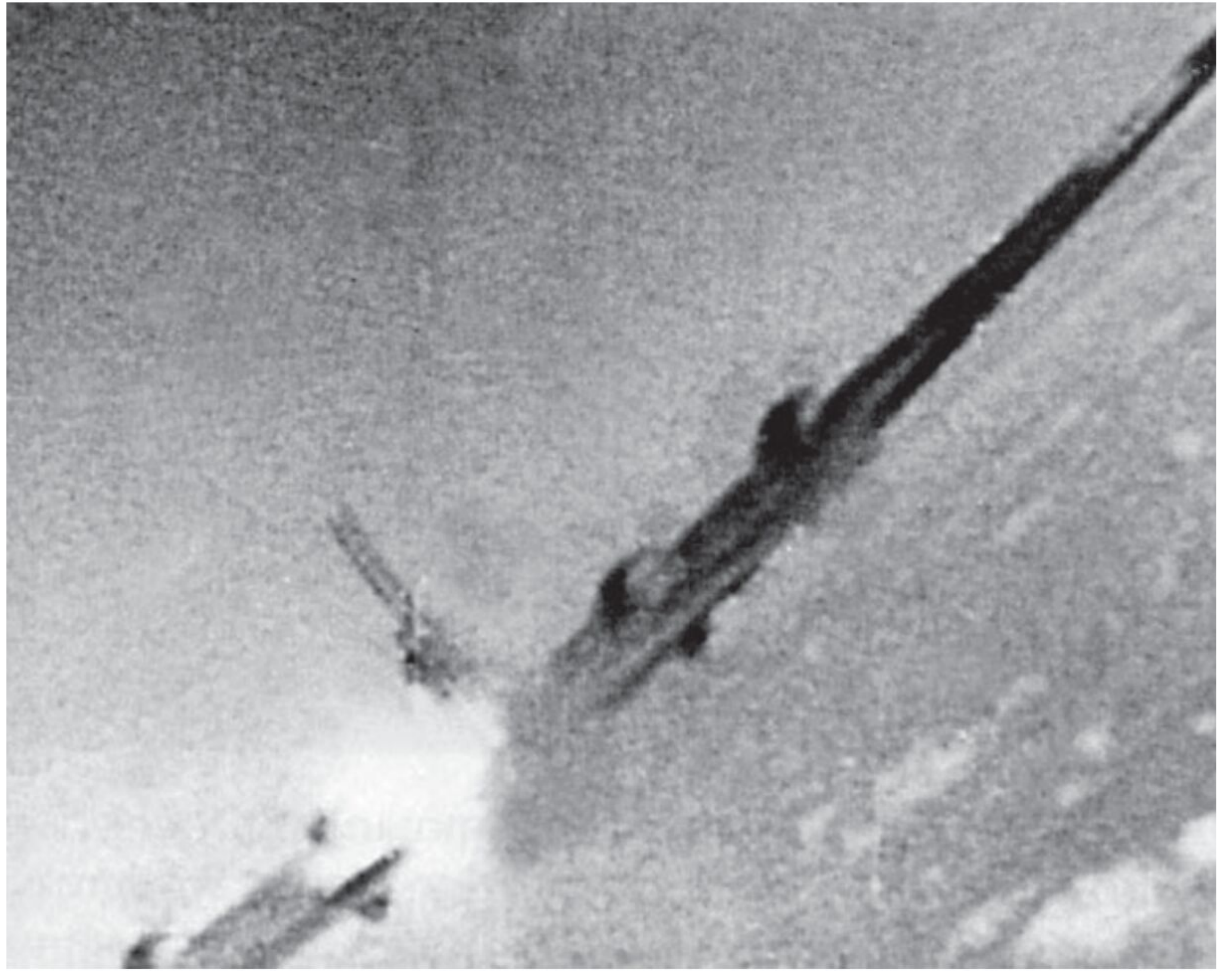
## And then there were four

The success of Dahl's unit resulted in Adolf Galland, *General der Jagdflieger*, ordering him to report to him at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim on May 20. At this meeting Galland proposed the establishment of a special unit made up of five independent fighter *Gruppen* to combat U.S. bombing raids. Known as *Jagdgeschwader zbV* (Fighter Wing for Special Operations) the unit comprised III./JG 3, I./JG 5, II./JG 27, II./JG 53 and III./JG 54 all equipped with Bf 109 Gs. After discussing the details with Galland's chief of staff, Maj. Müller-Trimbusch, Dahl flew to Ansbach to take over command of the new unit.

Dahl took off for the first time at the head of the newly created unit on May 23. However, no contact was made with the enemy, and the *Geschwader* returned to Ansbach and its surrounding airfields after an hour and 35 minutes flying time. Next day, a second operation was flown against a bomber formation with heavy fighter escort heading for Berlin. This time, they were set upon by P-51 Mustangs over Rangsdorf, and despite a pitched fighter-versus-fighter battle, some aircraft managed to get through to the bombers. Three days later, JGzbV clashed with another American bomber formation over Strasbourg. The *Kommandeur* of I./JG 5, Maj. Horst Carganico, was shot up by a bomber, and while attempting to make a forced landing, crashed into high tension wires and was killed. Further operations were flown by JGzbV on May 31, but between June 1 and 5 the *Geschwader* was grounded owing to bad weather conditions. Early on June 6, Allied troops landed in Normandy, heralding the invasion of Europe. Within the next few days, virtually all the *Luftwaffe* fighter units were transferred to the front, leaving only the four aircraft from the Stab of JGzbV.

## No mere courtesy visit

One of the units that had transferred to the West was the recently formed IV.(*Sturm*)/JG 3. This unit had been established from *Sturmstaffel 1*, which had been set up to use specially armored fighters to get in as close to the bombers as possible before opening



fire, even (as a last resort) deliberately ramming them. It was soon realized that this unit was unsuitable for operations over Normandy, and it was withdrawn to Ansbach in southern Germany on June 21. It was joined in this area by two former *Wilde Sau* night fighting units, I. and II./JG 300. Six days later, Dahl took command of the Stab of JG 300, which was based at nearby Unterschlauersbach. This unit, equipped with the Fw 190, was placed in control of the previously mentioned three *Gruppen*. Four days later, Dahl flew the Fw 190 for the first time, and on July 7, he shot down a B-24 near Quedlingburg. On August 15, he shot down two B-17s, with two more following on September 11. Two days later he brought down another Fortress by ramming. By November 5, Dahl had brought down 27 B-17s and B-24s. Despite these successes, Dahl was irrationally relieved of his command during a visit by Göring on November 30, 1944. Dahl remembered the exchange later:

“Göring was in a belligerent mood, and I soon saw that this was to be no mere courtesy visit. The inspection had hardly started when he turned to me and asked why my aircraft were not airborne.

‘We could take off, *Herr Reichsmarschall*,’ Dahl replied, ‘but in this weather we would never get into formation. Most of my pilots have no blind-flying training and could never land again.’

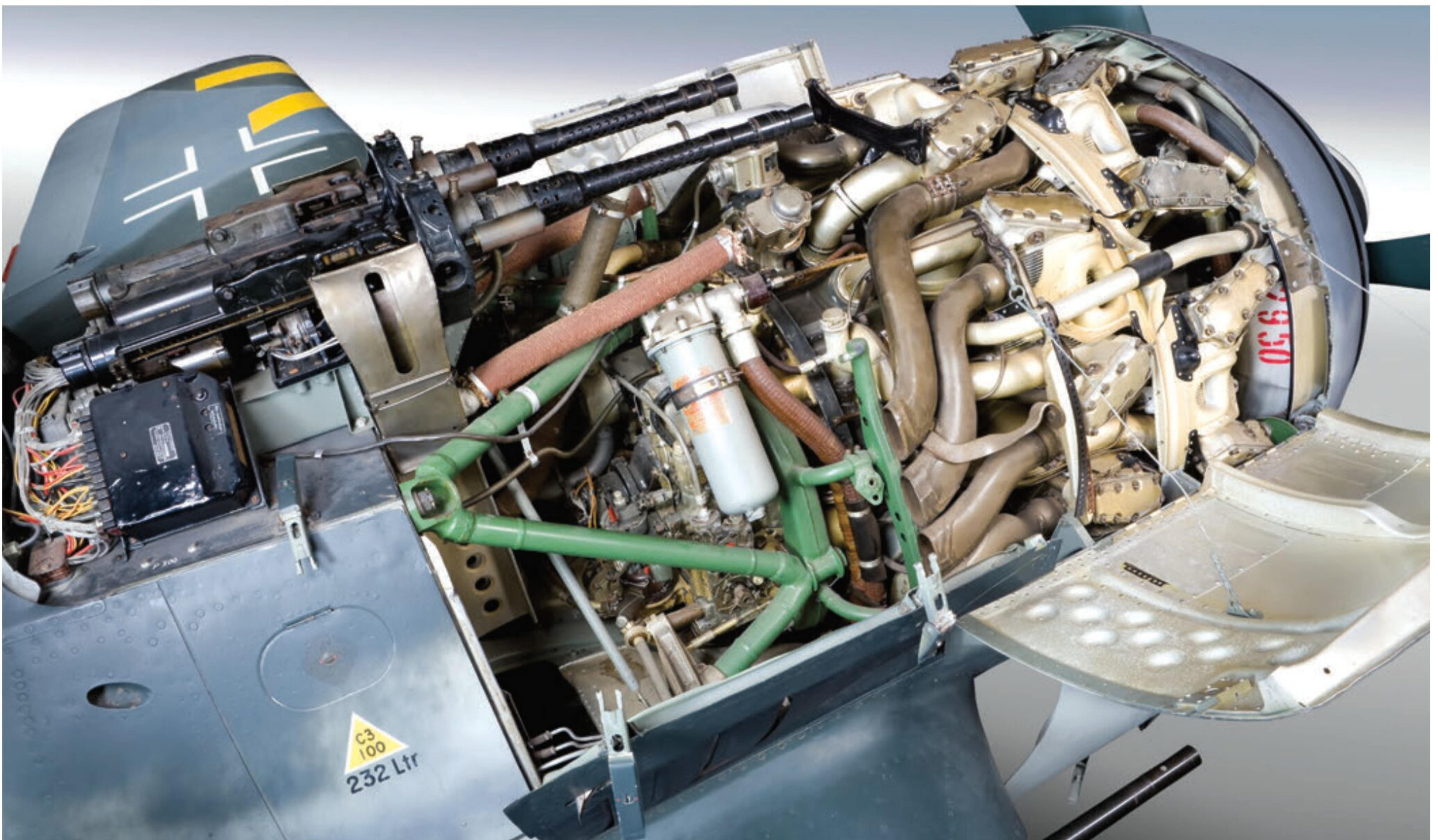
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Taken from a gun camera, this photograph shows a B-17 being shot up by a Fw 190. This is typical of the actions in which Dahl was involved. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection)



Kurt Tank's design for a rugged, yet nimble fighter-bomber exemplifies elegance in engineering. The cockpit has all controls and indicators arranged for ease of use under the stress of combat conditions. Side consoles provide easy reach, while the critical ammunition counters lie directly below the gunsight. (Photo by Brian Silcox)

The installation of BMW's 14-cylinder direct fuel-injected radial engine into the compact Focke-Wulf 190 further belies the talent of Tank's engineering staff. Oil cooling and induction air were neatly designed into the fan-pressurized cowling to maximize efficiency and durability in combat. (Photo by Brian Silcox)



Flying Heritage Collection's Fw 190A-5 just prior to completion of flight tests and delivery to the museum's facility in March 2011. The field-applied camouflage was unique to JG54 operating on the Russian front near Leningrad in 1943. (Photo by Brian Silcox)



## Saga of a Survivor: The Flying Heritage & Combat Armor Museum's Collection's Fw 190A-5

The Flying Heritage Collection (FHC) Focke-Wulf (based in Everett, Washington) is a Fw 190A-5 built in April 1943 as part of a batch of 981 aircraft at the F-W factory in Bremen. The FHC aircraft left the factory with the Stammkennzeichen (factory code) of DG+HO. It was probably test-flown at the factory and assigned to the reserve pool before being flown to the Eastern front via Jesau in mid-May 1943. It was assigned to 4./JG 54—Jagdgeschwader 54 (fighter wing 54), Staffel 4 (squadron 4) at Siverskiy just to the south-southwest of Leningrad in June or early July.

It is not clear when the FHC aircraft first saw action in the period from late May to early July 1943. However, Feldwebel (Fw., or sergeant) Paul Ratz joined 4./JG 54 on July 9, 1943 and flew the FHC aircraft on the day it was lost.

Fw. Ratz, as flight leader, and his wingman were on a "free hunt" mission over the "Corridor of Death" on July 19, 1943. The detailed Luftwaffe loss report indicates the two pilots encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire from a train they targeted, and that Fw. Ratz reported engine trouble and the need to make an emergency landing during the pullout.

The wingman reported seeing Fw. Ratz's plane for the last time just to the west of Volkhov. Fw. Ratz was listed as missing in action and, in fact, spent some six or seven years as a POW in Russia.

The FHC aircraft lay virtually untouched in a swampy forest for over 45 years ... Ratz's flying helmet placed neatly on the pilot's seat. It was "discovered" around 1989, when Rupert Wilbraham of the Soviet British Creative Association led an effort to locate war wrecks.

It appears as though Fw. Ratz piloted his powerless Fw 190 to a perfect belly landing in a swampy area forested with very small saplings. The wing leading edges showed evidence of having smashed through the saplings that later grew back and concealed the aircraft.

The major focus of restoration in the early years was the wing. The restorers found a number of field repairs and component wear including a crack in the wing spar under the fuselage, a crease in the starboard wing and repair work to the edge of the horizontal stabilizer—all indicating that the plane was in heavy use for the short period of its operational life.

It was readily apparent at the time of recovery that Fw. Ratz and his Fw 190 were not downed by anti-aircraft fire; there was no damage from enemy fire. The engine had, in fact, overheated and seized. Sabotage is alleged and, interestingly, the date "5.7.43" (5 July 1943) was painted in yellow on the hub indicating an engine change 14 days prior to the aircraft going down.

The FHC purchased the aircraft in 1999, and it was imported into the U.S. in September 2006, where it was completed at GossHawk Unlimited in Casa Grande, Arizona.

In April 2011, the plane was delivered to the FHC and became the first Fw 190 to take to the air since shortly after WW II. The museum's Fw 190 is still operational and continues to wow aviation enthusiasts who visit the museum from all over the world.

### GENERAL STATISTICS

#### Fw 190A-5

**Crew:** 1

**Span:** 34 feet 5½ inches

**Length:** 29 feet 10 inches

**Height:** 12 feet 11½ inches

**Empty weight:** 6,504 pounds

**Loaded (maximum) weight:**  
9,612 pounds

**Engine:** BMW 801 D-2  
air-cooled, 14-cylinder,  
two row radial engine

**Engine power:** 1,700hp  
(2,100hp with methanol/  
water injection)

### PERFORMANCE

**Maximum speed:** 392mph

**Range:** 538 miles

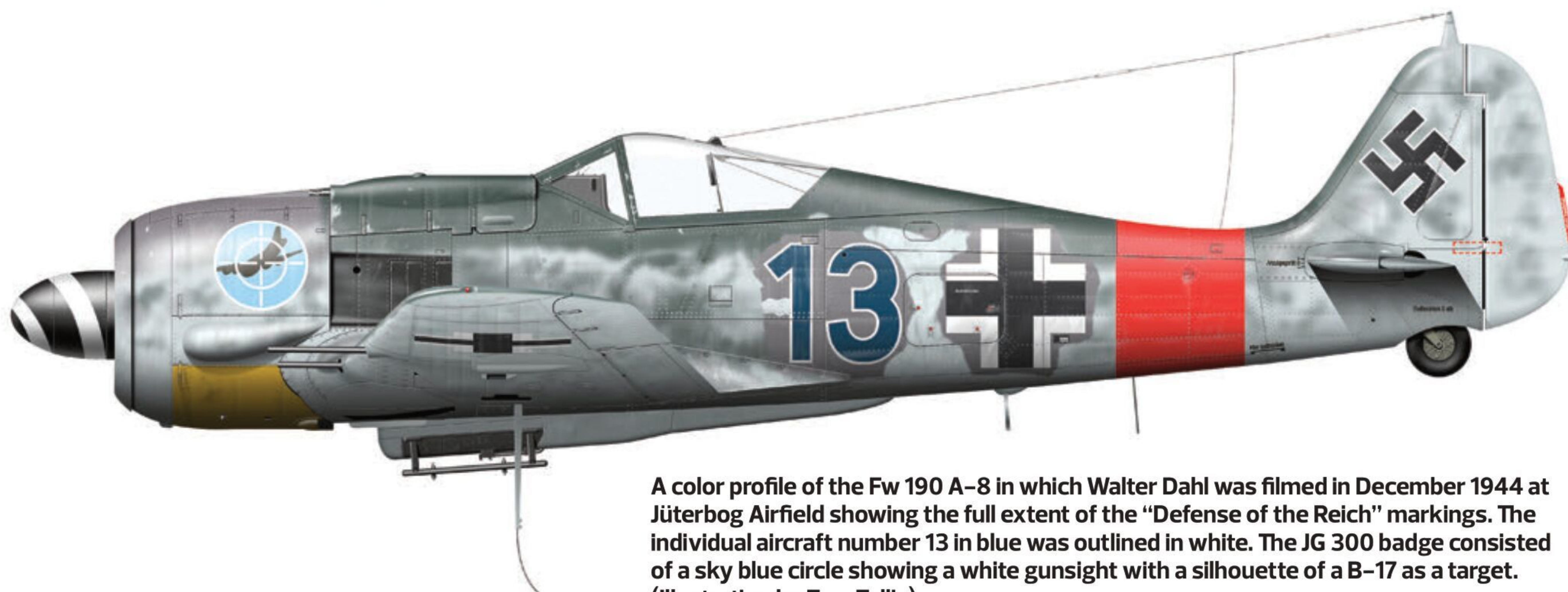
**Ceiling:** 32,808 feet

**Rate of climb:** 2,756 feet/min.

### ARMAMENT

- » 2 x Rheinmetall MG 17 7.9 mm machine guns over the engine;
- » 2 x Mauser MG 151 20 mm cannon in the wing roots;
- » Up to 1,320 pounds of ordnance





A color profile of the Fw 190 A-8 in which Walter Dahl was filmed in December 1944 at Jüterbog Airfield showing the full extent of the “Defense of the Reich” markings. The individual aircraft number 13 in blue was outlined in white. The JG 300 badge consisted of a sky blue circle showing a white gunsight with a silhouette of a B-17 as a target. (Illustration by Tom Tullis)

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“Göring’s reply astonished even me,” Dahl rememberd. “In the presence of pilots with heads, arms and legs in plaster he yelled: ‘You cowards! Now I know why your *Geschwader* holds the record for parachute

jumps—you jump so as not to fight!’

Dahl began to protest, but at that moment the sirens blared. Göring and his retinue at once drove off to the operations room, while he dismissed the grinning airmen to

## Luftwaffe Aces and an Explanation

The validity of the high scores reported by German Fighter pilots is often questioned, so an explanation is in order. Each German claim for the destruction of an enemy aircraft in aerial combat (*Abschuss*) had to be confirmed by the *Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe* (Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force). In this process, confirmation of each *Abschuss* had to be given by one aerial or ground witness, unless the destroyed aircraft was recovered or members of its crew taken prisoner. The *Abschuss* was then either endorsed or rejected by the claimant’s supervisor. If successful, the report was passed to the *Geschwader* staff and finally to the appropriate Air Ministry department. Then, after all the submitted paperwork was checked, an official confirmation was issued to the unit. This lengthy bureaucratic procedure could last up to one year or even longer.

	Pilot	Vics	Major type flown	Main area of combat
1.	Hptm. Erich Hartmann	352	Bf 109	East
2.	Major Gerhard Barkhorn	301	Bf 109, Fw 190	East & West
3.	Major Günther Rall	275	Bf 109, Fw 190	East & West
4.	Oblt. Otto Kittel	267	Fw 190	East
5.	Maj. Walter Nowotny	258	Bf 109, Fw 190, Me 262	East & West
6.	Maj. Wilhelm Batz	237	Bf 109	East
7.	Maj. Erich Rudorffer	222	Bf 109, Fw 190, Me 262	East, Africa, West
8.	Obstlt. Heinrich Bär	220	Bf 109, Fw 190, Me 262	East & West
9.	Oberst Hermann Graf	212	Bf 109	East
10.	Maj. Theodor Weissenberger	208	Bf 109, Fw 190, Me 262	North, East & West
11.	Obstlt. Hans Philipp	206	Bf 109, Fw 190	East & West
12.	Oblt. Walter Schuck	206	Bf 109, Me 262	North, East & West
13.	Oblt. Anton Hafner	204	Bf 109	Africa, East & West
14.	Maj. Heinrich Ehrler	204	Bf 109, Me 262	North & West
15.	Hptm. Helmut Lipfert	203	Bf 109	East
16.	Maj. Walter Krupinski	197	Bf 109, Fw 190, Me 262	East & West
17.	Maj. Anton Hackl	192	Bf 109, Fw 190	East & West
18.	Hptm. Joachim Brendel	189	Bf 109, Fw 190	East
19.	Hptm. Max Stotz	189	Bf 109, Fw 190	East
20.	Hptm. Joachim Kirschner	188	Bf 109	Africa & Greece



the shelters. "The weather was too much for the enemy," Dahl said. "Their bombs fell scattered, and relatively harmless, over a wide area. Göring then returned, his eyes blazing with fury. Rushing up to me, he seized me by the lapels, shook me, and shouted: 'Why have you not obeyed my orders? You cowards! I shall order my flak to shoot you from the skies!'

"I took a step backwards, and he had to let go. The other Luftwaffe generals stood around, thoroughly embarrassed. Never before since the time of Frederick the Great had a field marshal so manhandled an officer. 'I received no order, Herr *Reichsmarschall*. All I know is that there is an order from the *Führer* that in doubtful weather the decision to take off is to be left to the formation leader.'

" 'Hold your tongue, you rebel! You and your rotten fighter pilots are at last going to feel my hand. Before the sun sets tonight, I shall have you shot!' He was raving like a madman. Everyone fell silent as, turning to Dahl once again, he began, this time

ominously: 'I came here today to give you this.' Momentarily, he opened a leather case in which the Oak Leaves glittered. 'But now I cannot. Today I must make an example. From this moment you have lost your command and are degraded. There will be a court-martial, and you will be shot.' The case snapped shut. Raising his *Reichsmarschall's* baton to the attendant officers in a stiff farewell, he climbed into his giant Mercedes and shouted: 'Away! Drive me out of this sink!' "

To be shot for cowardice—or was it mutiny? To Dahl, it seemed a strange reward for shooting down over 80 enemy aircraft, bailing out 15 times, being wounded three times, and having no leave, except in hospital, since the war began.

Nevertheless, Dahl managed to keep flying, shooting down two more B-17s and a P-51 in December. Appointed Inspector of the Day Fighters on January 26, 1945, he added 15 Russian aircraft to his tally over the Eastern front, recording his 100th victory on February 28. Meanwhile, on

One of the Jagdwaffe's main *Sturmgruppen* was II./JG 4. This Fw 190 A-8/R2, coded "white 11" was captured by Allied forces following the German fighter attack on Allied airfields on New Year's Day 1945. The pilot, Gef. Walter Wagner, was taken prisoner. The *Sturmgruppen* initially proved very successful but, with the appearance of Allied fighters, their heavily armored aircraft began to suffer severe losses. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection)



Although designated by Hitler as *Reichsmarschall des Grossdeutschen Reiches* (Reich Marshal of the Greater German Reich) in 1940, Luftwaffe head Herman Göring found himself on the run in April, 1945 from both the Russians and Adolph Hitler making a hasty retreat to Berchtesgarden in Bavaria with a trainload of Nazi riches. His attempt to replace Hitler as Chancellor of the Third Reich to negotiate a surrender got him fired and under arrest by Gestapo officers. Goring quickly saw his fate and headed towards Allied lines along with his captors and quickly surrendered. He was paraded out to war correspondents for a “press conference” soon after, as seen here in his garish dress uniform. His celebrity quickly vanished with his conviction at the Nuremberg Trials and subsequent cyanide suicide before being hung. (Photo courtesy of EN Archive collection)

February 2, he had been ordered to report to Göring at Karinhall. In trepidation, Dahl flew to Rangsdorf and then took a car to the *Reichsmarschall's* country estate. Much to his surprise, he was greeted by a smiling Göring.

“Well, Dahl,” he said. “I’ll bet you didn’t think eight weeks ago that you would be standing here before me today!”

He gulped. “No, Herr *Reichsmarschall*.”

“I did you an injustice on that occasion. You were quite right not to take off with your *Geschwader*. And now at last you are going to receive this.”

Turning to a casket, he produced and hung round Dahl’s neck a ready-prepared band to which a Knight’s Cross and the Oak Leaves were attached, so that I stood there somewhat ridiculously with two Knight’s Crosses on me.

“In the name of the Führer, and at his special request, I invest you today with this high order. Wear it and fight on as bravely as before.”

### A respected leader

What happened? Afterwards, Dahl heard that his plight had reached Hitler. Gen. von Massow told him about the Führer’s outburst.

“That devil Göring!” he had exploded. “Has he gone mad? I know this Dahl; his is the only *Geschwader* that has done something to defend the Reich. And now Göring wants to shoot him!” Turning to his adjutant, Hitler had issued immediate orders that not only should he receive the Oak Leaves but also

that Dahl should be promoted to command all fighter forces in the Reich.

Not long after this, Dahl suggested to Hitler that he reverse his decision that the Me 262 jet should be used as a bomber, despite risk of incurring the Führer’s wrath. His words had some effect because, on March 22, Hitler publicly admitted the error he had made a year and a half earlier and ordered the concentration on the Me 262 as a fighter.

On March 27, Dahl shot down two P-47s to register his 102nd and 103rd victories, and on April 4, he claimed his 110th. In a 10-day period following this, from April 9 to 19, he shot down 15 Russian aircraft, mainly Il-2s and Yak 9s. Following this, he transferred to the Me 262 fighter conversion unit, III./EJG 2, shooting down a P-51 on the 19th. On the 24th, Dahl claimed a B-17 followed by a P-51 two days later. This was his 128th and last victory, claimed during 678 combat missions, including about 300 ground-attack sorties. Of this total, 77 were scored on the Eastern front and 36 were four-engine bombers. On April 30 he was promoted to Oberst (colonel).

Dahl was by no means the highest-scoring *Luftwaffe* ace, actually being joint 59th on the list, which was led by Erich Hartmann. Nevertheless, he survived the war as a much respected leader who was forced to defend his unit against the stupidity of Nazi leadership—a not uncommon problem experienced by German pilots. He died on November 25, 1985, at Heidelberg, aged 69. ➔