

# Over the Beaches

The *Luftwaffe* was ill-prepared for what was about to happen on 6 June 1944, but over the next 24 hours it was forced to come to terms with what faced them; Operation *Overlord* and the Allied invasion of Europe. **Chris Goss** tells the story of that first crucial 24 hours from the perspective of the German Air Force.

Available to the Allies when operations began on D-Day was a staggering aerial armada of around 12,000 aircraft of all types, and during the initial operations on 6 June 1944 no less than 14,674 sorties were flown in support of the landings. Albeit that 127 aircraft were lost to all causes, the *Luftwaffe* faced a David v. Goliath battle. And yet, notwithstanding that huge imbalance of air power, the *Luftwaffe* fought boldly in that unequal struggle.

In the six hours preceding the Normandy landings, almost 1,000 RAF Bomber Command aircraft attacked German gun emplacements all along the general beachhead area. They were attacks that were not without cost, several being downed by *Luftwaffe* fighters. Strangely, of the six claims filed by German night fighters, four were submitted by a fighter-bomber unit flying the Focke Wulf 190; 3 Staffel/Schnellkampfgeschwader. Until now, 3./SKG10 had been carrying out nocturnal attacks on southern England. However, on the night of 5/6 June 1944, Oberleutnant Helmut Eberspächer and Feldwebel

Helmut Eisele of 3./SKG10, intercepted RAF bombers attacking gun batteries to the west of the beachhead, claiming four Lancasters destroyed between 0504 and 0504 hrs. The unit would only repeat this nocturnal success once more when Oberfeldwebel Franz Kahlhammer of 3./SKG10 was credited with an unidentified aircraft destroyed on the night of 4-5 July 1944, although this claim does not figure in Kahlhammer's logbook. By then, 1./SKG10 was much needed for its core operations: night fighter-bomber missions.

The two remaining claims

on the night of 5-6 June were for a B-24, 12 km south-east of Brussels, shot down by Leutnant Otto Teschner of 11 Staffel, Nachtjagdgeschwader 11, along with a Mosquito of 515 Sqn, downed over Holland by Hauptmann Heinz Strüning of 3./NJG1 in what was Strüning's 49th 'kill' of the war.

## LUFTWAFFE LOSSES

The first recorded *Luftwaffe* loss that night occurred at 0148 hrs on 6 June, although this was actually an aircraft engaged on an offensive sortie. Oberfeldwebel Hermann Bolten and his radio operator Feldwebel Wilhelm Lohf of 4 Staffel Kampfgeschwader 51 lifted off from St Andre airfield in northern France at 0130 hrs in their Messerschmitt Me 410. Bolten was an experienced pilot who had been responsible for test flying the Me 210 and (from January 1943) its improved successor, the Me 410. He had initially been posted to V Gruppe, Kampfgeschwader 2 at Coulommiers in August 1943, flying his first operational sortie in the Me 410 on 23 September 1943. By 6 June 1944, he had flown no less than 81 operational flights in the Me 210 and 410, having already being shot down once on 22 February 1944 by a 96 Sqn Mosquito crewed by Flt Sgt Tom Bryan and Sgt Basil Friis. His 82nd war flight would be his last.

The purpose of Hermann's flight on 6 June 1944 was either a night-fighter sortie in response to Bomber Command's attacks on the gun batteries, or a long-range intruder sortie over England. Unfortunately, the exact nature of the operational flight remains unclear. However, as Hermann was returning to the airfield at Ste André, he was unaware that someone else was in the circuit.

New Zealand-born Fg Off Roy Lelong and Flt Sgt John McLaren in a Mosquito of 605 Sqn had taken off from RAF Manston, Kent, to support the airborne landings. They had first visited the *Luftwaffe*'s Evreux and Ste André airfields, only to find them unlit and inactive. However, at 0130 hrs, the landing lights at Ste André came on, only to immediately go off again. After this brief illumination, the Mosquito dropped four bombs on the airfield. Surprisingly, the lights then came on again and the RAF crew immediately spotted an aircraft:



■ Oblt. Helmut Eberspächer of 3./SKG 10, who shot down three Lancasters between 0501 and 0504 hrs, 6 June 1944.





■ German reconnaissance photograph taken from high altitude of Asnelles-sur-Mer, Normandy, but showing the Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches. The photographing unit is stated as being 1.(F)/121 which was operating Me 410s, but in fact was taken by Oblt Erich Sommer who was flying an Arado 234 jet.



■ An unidentified pilot of 8./JG54 with his Focke Wulf 190, May 1944.



■ An unidentified Junkers 88 R-2 of I./ZG1, shot down over Normandy, June 1944.

“...the pilot obtained a visual on an aircraft at 1,000 feet silhouetted against cloud [which] helped him to recognise it as an Me 410. The aircraft was carrying no lights. Fg Off Lelong then flew in a steady climb to just underneath the enemy aircraft and confirmed it as an Me 410, he then throttled back and pulled up to dead astern and at a range of 150 yds, opened fire. Strikes were seen around the cockpit area and the aircraft then burst into flames. It then lost height slowly in a spiral dive and finally crashed about seven miles SE of Evreux airfield. Fg Off Lelong then lost height and took photographs of the aircraft burning on the ground. Five minutes later the aircraft exploded and pieces continued to burn...”

The report from 4./KG51 confirms the Mosquito crew's observations, stating that on returning to Ste André from an operational flight, the Me 410 was attacked by a night fighter and spun into the ground from just 100 metres at Marcilly-la-Campagne. Hermann was seriously injured in the crash and never flew again during the war. Wilhelm Lohf was killed.

## THROWN INTO ACTION

As dawn broke, *Overlord* was well and truly underway. According to reconnaissance pilot Oberleutnant Paul-Adalbert, flying a Messerschmitt 109 of 3 Staffel, Nahaufklärungsgruppe 13, he was the first member of the Luftwaffe to witness the invasion fleet from the air. This cannot be substantiated, especially in view of the fact that when he was interrogated after being shot down and captured on 19 July 1944, he made absolutely no mention of this claim, stating simply that he had flown a fruitless reconnaissance sortie in the Caen area that day. It is similarly surprising that the pilots of 3./SKG10 did not mention anything of the invasion fleet when they were shooting down Lancasters at around 0500 hrs.

The problem now facing the Luftwaffe was that



■ Oblt. Sommer (Ops Officer), Maj. Willi Sölter (Kdr), Fw. Schmidt (radio operator to Kdr), Lt. Kurt Becker and Uffz. Franke of I./KG77 gather around an operations planning table.



■ Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 of 5./JG2 flown by Oblt. Gerd Schaedle photographed at Creil just before the invasion.

**“Our losses during these attacks were enormous. I had seen how my comrades were butchered. These combats were so cruel, and the enemy’s air superiority was overwhelming.”** *Unteroffizier Aegidius Berzborn*

Luftflotte 3 (responsible for the invasion area) had just 815 aircraft at its disposal, of which only 481 were operational on 5 June. This was down to just 319 at the end of the first day of the invasion. Broken down, what Luftflotte 3 initially had available was as follows:

IX Fliegerkorps	18 Focke Wulf 190s of I./SKG10 and 67 operational Ju 88/188
2 Jagdkorps	185 day and night fighters
X Fliegerkorps	20 He 177s and Ju 88 fighters in south-west France.
2 Fliegerdivision	44 torpedo bombers in southern France.

Understandably, there were immediate and frantic redeployments. One such unit was the Junkers 88 C-6 and Junkers 88 R-2 equipped Zerstörergeschwader 1 commanded by Oberstleutnant Erich von Selle. For the previous two years, ZG 1 had been carrying out armed reconnaissance and fighter duties over the Bay of Biscay off France’s western coast. However, it had become clear that an Allied invasion would soon come, and the Ju 88 crews began carrying out reconnaissance missions looking out for any signs of invasion. At the same time, crews began practicing low level flying (much to the annoyance of the French population) in preparation for attacks against anticipated Allied shipping and ground targets. It therefore came as no surprise to ZG1 that in the afternoon of 6 June 1944, they were thrown into action.

Unteroffizier Aegidius Berzborn recalls what happened: *“The days before the invasion began, there had been*

*permanent air attacks on our bases so that we were often forced to move to other airfields. Then came the ‘Longest Day’. I do not recall how many missions we flew to the Orne Estuary, but for these missions our ‘planes carried bombs under the wings. Our losses during these attacks were enormous. I had seen how my comrades were butchered. These combats were so cruel, and the enemy’s air superiority was overwhelming”.*

The logbook of Unteroffizier Rolf Dickel, a pilot with 3 Staffel ZG1, shows that following his annotation ‘Invasionbegin’, reconnaissance missions were flown from Lorient, taking off at 0835 hrs, and landing back 1102 hrs after having been chased by four Mosquitoes.

Allied records note the appearance of Ju 88s in the middle of the afternoon, as shown by 222 Sqn’s Operations Record Book:

“Third show was laid on in the afternoon - another patrol over the assault area. Soon after arrival on the patrol line, some enemy reaction was reported. Blue Section, led by Plt



■ Uffz. Aegidius Berzborn of 1./ZG1.

Off R H Reid, saw four Ju 88s and gave chase. Plt Off Reid fired at one but the Hun entered cloud and no claim was made. The Wing destroyed four and damaged three..."

At 1545 hrs near Caen, 349 Sqn (Spitfires) claimed three Junkers 88s damaged whilst Flt Sgt J C I Van Melkot and Sgt J Braggard shared one destroyed, Fg Off J Moureau and Fg Off M J Sans shared the destruction of a second, and Fg Off Moureau a third. Meanwhile, Fg Off J Houlton of 485 Sqn (Spitfires) destroyed one more and four other pilots from 485 Sqn shared the destruction of another. Of these losses, 2./ZG 1 reported the loss of three Ju 88s with seven crew killed and two baling out unscathed, whilst a fourth Ju 88 was shot down with all crew baling out behind German lines - albeit wounded. As Berzborn remarked, it was certainly the case that Luftwaffe losses during the invasion were enormous.

In the days that followed, ZG1 carried out similar missions. These were missions for which they had not been trained or their aircraft were best suited. As a



result, the unit was slaughtered over Normandy-on 7 June 1944, with seven aircraft shot down and at least one damaged with 17 crewmen killed, two POW. Then, on 9 and 10 June, five aircraft were shot down with 11 killed, two wounded and one POW. Added to this, a Ju 52 carrying

■ Uffz. Erich Keller of 2./ZG1, wounded 6 June 44.



■ Oberst. Josef Priller of JG26 inspects bomb damage at the unit's home airfield.

groundcrew from 7./ZG 1 crashed off Cazaux on 7 June 1944 with 15 of those on board killed. It is no surprise, then, that as result of this attrition rate, I and II./ZG 1 were unable to continue operations after 10 June 1944. The unit was disbanded at the end of the following month, having played no further part in the air war over Normandy

## FIGHTERS OVER THE BEACHES

One perpetuated myth, mainly the result of the film *The Longest Day*, is that the only Luftwaffe fighters to make an appearance over the beaches were the Focke Wulf 190s flown by Oberst Josef 'Pips' Priller and his wingman Unteroffizier Heinz Wodarczyk from Jagdgeschwader 26. This is far from the truth. Priller *did* make an appearance first thing in the morning, but it was the fighters Jagdgeschwader 2 that made the biggest impression of the day - albeit in the role of air fighting rather than harassing the landing operations. (See page xx *'Strafing the Beaches'*)

The first claim for JG2 (also Focke Wulf 190s) was by Major Kurt Bühligen, the Geschwader Kommodore. This was a P-47 south of the beachhead, claimed just before midday. Another 18 claims were submitted by JG2, comprising a total 'bag' of nine Typhoons, three P-47s and six P-51s, the final claim being submitted by Oberleutnant Bruno Siekmann of 9./JG2 at 2105 hrs. Only two other German pilots from other units filed air combat claims - Oberleutnant Franz Kunz of 2./JG26 and Hauptmann Heinz Mihlan of 8./Schlachtgeschwader 4 each claimed a



■ Oberst. 'Pips' Priller of JG26 is helped from his Focke Wulf 190, Normandy, summer 1944.



■ The relatively few German fighters in Normandy were still a potent force when they engaged Allied aircraft. This Spitfire of 602 Sqn fell to the guns of either JG26 or JG54 over Normandy on 4 July 1944, killing Fg Off James Kelly.

P-51. (NB: The latter unit was a ground attack Geschwader as opposed to a dedicated fighter unit.)

Loss-wise, JG2 lost two Focke Wulf 190s with their pilots killed, and JG26 lost four with one pilot killed and two others wounded. While the balance sheet for 6 June 1944, seems to favour the German fighters it was the case that in the following days most of those who scored on D-Day ultimately found themselves on the receiving end. Ritterkreuz winner Hauptmann Herbert Huppertz, Kommandeur of III./JG2 (who claimed five fighters on 6 June) would be shot down and killed two days later with his total of 'kills' standing at 70. Another Ritterkreuz holder, Major Erich Hohagen of I./JG2, would be injured on 28 September 1944. It was a tally which was draining away the very life blood of the Luftwaffe's fighter 'experten'.

Amongst those from the fighter force who were lost, wounded or captured across subsequent days were: Gefreiter Manfred Fieseler of 10./JG2 killed 7 June; Leutnant Wolfgang Fischer of 3./JG2 captured 7 June; Feldwebel Fritz Schüler of 12./JG2 wounded 8 June; Bruno Siekmann of 9./JG2 reported missing on 12 June; Unteroffizier Romuald Nistler of 2./JG2 killed 12 June; Oberfeldwebel Ludwig Hartmann of Stab I./JG2 killed 20 June; Fähnrich Fritz Beer of Stab I./JG 2 killed 23 June; Franz Kunz of 2/JG26 shot down and wounded on 28 June; Unteroffizier Karl Bielohlawec 12./JG2 killed 10 July and Fähnrich Hans-Joachim Voormann of 12./JG2 killed 25 July 1944.

Such losses to increasing Allied air superiority could

simply could not be sustained. The skies over Normandy had become an extremely dangerous place for the Luftwaffe.

## CATASTROPHIC MAULING

As events unfolded, so the Luftwaffe continued to rush reinforcements to the front during the afternoon of 6 June, with Jabos (fighter-bombers) of III./SG4 flying from Clastres to Laval, a number carrying ground crew in the rear fuselage. Six were shot down in three separate combats with American fighters from the 62nd Fighter Sqn and 83rd Fighter Sqn (78th Fighter Group) and the 15th Recon Sqn in the Le Mans/Laval/Mayenne/Brétigny area, with four pilots from Stab III, 7 and 8./SG4 killed,



■ Hptm. Herbert Huppertz, Kommandeur of III./JG2, who claimed five fighters on 6 June 1944 but was shot down and killed on 8 June.



■ The Focke Wulf 190s of 2./NAG 13, photographed at Cuers.

along with four ground crew who were being carried in the fuselages of the Focke Wulf 190s and had no hope of escape. Hauptmann Heinz Mihlan of 8./SG4 claimed to have shot down an attacking P-51, only to be shot down himself immediately afterwards and baling out unharmed at St Jean D'Assé. His passenger, Feldwebel Hans Eidam, was unable to get out of the fuselage and was



■ Although taken at the end of the war, this photograph shows the small fuselage hatch on the Focke Wulf 190 into which hapless groundcrew members were crammed as units moved up nearer to the invasion area.

killed. These losses did not prevent III./SG4 flying three further missions that evening, with 13 aircraft operating against targets at Ouistreham, Lion-Sur-Mer and St Aubin. Meanwhile, ever more desperate efforts by the Luftwaffe to counter the Allied invasion were put in place, as units were moved up towards the beachhead.

One of those movements involved the Junkers 87 Stukas of I and II./SG103, based at Biblis and Metz-Frescaty. Essentially, these were just training units but were rushed west late that evening, apparently to be based at Le Mans in preparation for intended attacks on the beachhead the following day. Unfortunately, near Chartres, the aged Stukas were bounced by aircraft of the 339 and 355 Fighter Groups who claimed 12 destroyed, one probably destroyed and five damaged. In fact, nine Stukas were either destroyed or badly damaged in what was a catastrophic mauling.

Darkness on the evening of the 6th now gave the Luftwaffe's bombers the chance to attack both the invasion fleet and troops already on land - but it was no easy task. It was, however, a task to which a number of regular bomber units were committed. The Junkers 188s and Dornier 217s of KG 2, for instance, targeted landing craft in the Seine and Orne Estuaries, losing a Ju 188 of 3./KG2 in the process. KG6 suffered similarly - losing a Ju 188 of 1./KG6 with another Ju 188 of 7./KG 6 returning with two crew injured by Flak, and yet another Ju 188 of 7./KG 6 being abandoned near St Pol. The Ju 88s of KG54 also



■ This Junkers 88 of 9./KG54 was shot down by Flak at Colleville-sur-Mer, Normandy, at 0400 hrs on 13 June 1944 whilst attacking shipping. Obergefreiters Franz Schrapel, Bruno Schlag and Heinz Lemke and Unteroffizier Kurt Gerber were all killed.



■ Hptm. Theo Weissenberger (Gruppe Kommandeur) of I./JG5, left, photographed on 8 August 1944.



■ Uffz. Gerhard Wieden of 8./JG 54 poses with his aircraft. He was wounded 6 June 1944.

suffered badly, losing five aircraft - including those flown by Hauptmann Herbert Birkner, Staffelfkapitän of 3./KG54, and Hauptmann Franz Dollensky of 8./KG54.

Meanwhile, the huge Heinkel 177s of I and II./KG 40 were also brought into action and suffered particularly badly, the units losing five bombers, predominantly to Mosquitoes of 456 Sqn. In total, 29 aircrew of KG40 lost their lives with just one of the crew members being captured. The pathfinders of KG66 and KG 76 were also in action, the latter unit having been rushed up from the Mediterranean; just one pathfinder was lost, a Ju 188 from 2./KG66. Finally, the Do 217s of KG 100 were also in action but suffered no losses.

## FRIENDLY FIRE

The precarious situation the Luftwaffe now found itself in meant committing yet more assets from further

afield. Until now, the Junkers 88s of III./KG26 and KG77 had been busy carrying out torpedo missions over the Mediterranean and operating from southern France. Now, they were rushed northwards. The logbook of Oberleutnant Kurt Becker of 2./KG77 illustrated what was involved, indicating they took off from their airfield at La Jasse near Toulon at 1909 hrs, landed for refuelling at Cognac in western France and again at Saumur, before returning via Cognac and finally arriving back at La Jasse at 0740 hrs the next morning. During this period, they had attacked shipping in torpedo strikes but without any perceptible result. Such trips were fraught with difficulty and the ever-present danger from anti-aircraft guns of both sides.

For the German flak units, the gunners were doubtless a little trigger-happy. After all, the majority of aircraft in the air were Allied and there was likely a tendency to shoot first and ask questions later. After all, the gunners



had seconds to make what were life-and-death decisions with low-flying and fast-moving aircraft which were often difficult to positively identify in split seconds. The Ju 88 of Oberfeldwebel Anton Günther of 3./KG77, for instance, fell victim to friendly fire when shot down by Flak from the 17th SS Panzer Grenadiers near Angers at 2130 hrs. He and his crew were all killed. It would appear that this was the only loss suffered by KG77, although 8./KG26 lost Feldwebel Helmut Kramer and his crew, shot down into the sea by Flak.

It was clear, though, that Allied Flak, and especially night fighters, had done well; the RAF alone claiming 13 aircraft destroyed, and four damaged whilst the RAF fighters were either intruding or on beachhead patrols. At least seven of those aircraft destroyed by night-fighters were Junkers 52 transport aircraft supporting the move of air and ground personnel closer to the front in Normandy. Overall, the damage being inflicted on the Luftwaffe was catastrophic.

Surprisingly, the dedicated German night fighter force did not make much of an impact until after midnight on the night of 6 June 1944. During the day, four night-fighter Gruppe were withdrawn from defence of the Reich duties and hastily moved up into France. Of the 13 claims they made that night, two were off Jersey, one off Brighton and the remainder over the beachhead and Caen areas. Bomber Command reported losing 12 aircraft over France



■ Light German flak in Normandy during the summer of 1944. Flak was deadly to friend and foe alike and there were frequent 'friendly fire' episodes.

**“Aircraft numbers and leaders were so depleted that many Geschwaders were soon disbanded or else combined with others and moved further away from the front.”**



■ Oblt. Kurt Becker of I./KG77 (above left) and (above right) Ritterkreuz holder Hptm. Rudolf Puchinger, Kommandeur of III./KG6, who was shot down and killed 13 Jun 44.




during attacks on Caen, Chateaudun, Coutances, Lisieux and Vire. On the German side, the only loss was a Ju 88 R-2 of I./NJG2 flown by Oberleutnant Ernst Jochems, to the north of Orléans. Again, the aircraft had been shot down by friendly fire.

### DEPLETED NUMBERS

The first day of Overlord was over, but the following days would be much harder fought for both sides. As the Allies consolidated their ground positions, it ultimately enabled advanced landing grounds (ALGs) to be constructed, meaning that more Allied fighters could stay longer in the air and range much further into German territory. For the Luftwaffe, especially the bomber force, their aircrew, aircraft numbers and leaders were so depleted that many Geschwaders were soon disbanded or else combined with others and moved further away from the front.

It had been an epic and unequal struggle, but the Luftwaffe – with its limited manpower and resources – had fought courageously and determinedly, notwithstanding the fact that they were hopelessly outnumbered. The Luftwaffe had acquitted itself with honour in the face of overwhelming odds.

Ultimately, this unequal struggle saw Allied air superiority quickly become Allied air supremacy. It was the beginning of the end for the Luftwaffe on the Western Front. 

## Strafing the Beaches

Jagdgeschwader 26 first got word of the invasion in a telephone call to Oberst 'Pips' Priller at his Lille-Nord command post. Priller was told that JG26 had been put under the command of the 5th Jagddivision, and to begin a transfer of his Gruppen to bases nearer to the beachhead. Orders were quickly passed to the nearby First Gruppe and to the Third Gruppe of JG26 at Nancy-Essey to get their operational fighters airborne and en-route to the airfields at Creil and Cormeilles, while Priller's men were told to load their trucks and head south toward Poix. The First and Third Gruppe truck convoys were already on the road with those units' ground personnel, but unfortunately headed in the wrong direction. The First was going to Reims in anticipation of a permanent base move; the Third was moving southeast to Nancy.

The convoys were located by radio and told to halt. Meanwhile, Hauptmann Naumann's Second Gruppe pilots had already taken off from Mont de Marsan and Biarritz at 0700 and had reached Vrox, awaiting further orders. Beyond ordering the Second Gruppe ground staff to pack up, Priller had no further orders; the Allied landings had upset all the Luftwaffe's plans.

Having done all he could, Priller and his wingman, Unteroffizier Heinz Wodarczyk, headed for their Focke-Wulf 190s, parked just outside the command post. The first Luftwaffe response to the invasion was underway.

The pair took off into the grey skies at 0800, with Priller's only orders to Wodarczyk being 'Stick close!' They headed west at low altitude, spotting Spitfires above them as far east as Abbeville. Near Le Havre the duo climbed into solid cloud. When they emerged, the ships of history's largest assault landing were spread out below. After a shouted "Good luck!" to Wodarczyk, Priller screamed down towards the beach at 650 kph (400 mph). The British soldiers on Sword, the easternmost of the five landing beaches, jumped for cover as the two fighters roared overhead at 50 feet, their machine gun and cannon fire ripping along the sands. The fleet's anti-aircraft guns furiously opened fire, but the Focke-Wulfs roared through the barrage unscathed. After a single firing pass along the beach, the two pilots climbed for the clouds, honour satisfied, and headed back to Creil.

Their D-Day mission, the most famous in the history of the Geschwader thanks to Cornelius Ryan's book *The Longest Day* and the resulting movie, was over.



■ Oberst. 'Pips' Priller discusses the unfolding situation of the invasion on D-Day, 6 June 1944, as he confers with fellow officers over a map of the Normandy coastline.

Image credit: Marina Amaral.

“While the balance sheet for 6 June 1944, seems to favour the German fighters it was the case that in the following days most of those who scored on D-Day ultimately found themselves on the receiving end. The losses represented a tally draining away the very life blood of the Luftwaffe's fighter 'experten'. Such losses to Allied air superiority could simply could not be sustained. The skies over Normandy had become an extremely dangerous place for the Luftwaffe.”