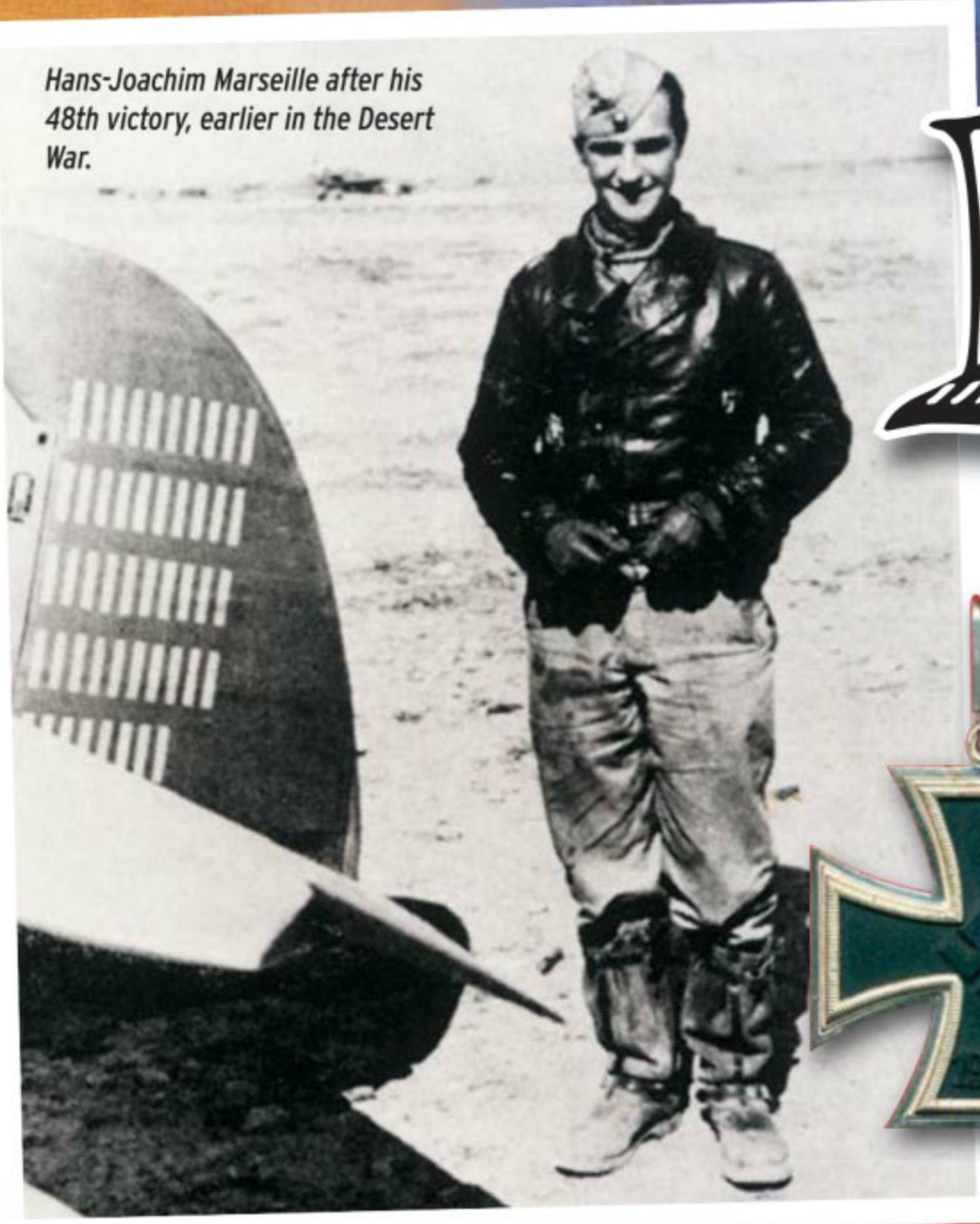


Hans-Joachim Marseille after his 48th victory, earlier in the Desert War.



LEGEND

AND

TRUTH




Hans-Joachim Marseille, FIRST AND LAST

The 'Star of Africa's' first victory came on his first operational sortie, on August 24, 1940 when he sent a British fighter diving into the English Channel. (It is not confirmed exactly who was his first 'kill'.) His final victory, his 158th 'official' shoot down, was a Spitfire V near El Daba on September 26, 1942 - his seventh of the day. All but seven of his victories were over the Western Desert.

Four days later while piloting Bf 109G-2 *Yellow 14* the reduction gear failed and caught fire. He had no option but to bale out. It seems that he hit the tail; his body plummeted to earth without his parachute being deployed.





MICHAEL SCHOEMAN EXAMINES
A FAMOUS AERIAL COMBAT
INVOLVING THE ENIGMATIC
HANS-JOACHIM MARSEILLE

In June 1942 rival armies were locked in combat in and about the Western Desert's Gazala Line, near Tobruk. Above the carnage, air battles marked the rise of Oberleutnant Hans-Joachim Marseille who would soon become the 'Star of Africa' and a legend in his own life-time. His shooting and tactical ability were remarkable. With 69 victories he was already one of the acknowledged experten – the Luftwaffe term for a leading 'ace'.

General Erwin Rommel - the 'Desert Fox' - had advanced to attack the British Eighth Army from the flank. But there was a thorn in his side. The Free French outpost in the fortification of Bir Hacheim, at the southern point of the Gazala Line, was holding out. For the first time since 1940 French troops were fighting the Germans in a major battle.

The RAF's hard-pressed Western Desert Air Force (WDAF) had to divert fighters to intercept the Luftwaffe attacks on the outpost. There was little chance of British ground forces being spared to mount a relief expedition.

BRAVO, JOACHIM!

On June 3, 1942, the Junkers Ju 87s of I Gruppe/Stuka Geschwader 3 carried out a raid on the stubborn French position, and six Messerschmitt Bf 109Fs of the third staffel of I/Jagdgeschwader 27 flew as escort under the leadership of Marseille. The formation arrived over the target in the early afternoon and the dive-bombers rolled into their trajectories. The escorts spotted around 35 British fighters poised to attack; the three pairs of '109s spread out to protect their charges.

Marseille and his wingman climbed to get above the most immediate threat. Curtiss fighters, estimated at between 12 and 16 in number, turned away from their pursuit curve towards the diving 'Stukas' and swept into a defensive circle at 3,500ft (1,066m) having apparently spotted the '109s.

Now at 5,000ft Marseille initiated his first attack and his wingman, Reiner Pöttgen, watched him make six successive dives. The propeller hub-mounted 20mm cannon on Marseille's Bf 109F-4/Trop *Gelbe 14* ('Yellow 14') stopped after the first few passes but, with a remarkable economy of fire, his machine-guns were sufficient for the rest. ➔



Starting with victory number 70 at 12:22 (German standard time), he scored four more times, with an even pace, at 12:25, 12:27, 12:28 and 12:29. He was decimating the Curtiss fighters.

Rejoining his rottenflieger (wingman), Marseille noted that the remaining enemy fighters were circling at lower altitude. The 'Star of Africa' dived yet again. At 12:33 (13:33 British time) the sixth victim was diving and trailing smoke. Only 11 minutes had elapsed since he had first scored.

Marseille was surprised to hear on his radio a call of: "Bravo, Joachim!" The Geschwader Kommodore, Oberstleutnant 'Edu' Neumann, had arrived over the scene of the aerial massacre. The other pilots echoed the congratulations, not having managed to gain any decisive results themselves.

The Messerschmitt formation returned to base as the surviving Curtisses in the circle broke off and headed home. The sixth and last Curtiss that Marseille had hit was seen to be steadily losing height and trailing smoke as it struggled

eastwards. That was victory No.75.

The armourers found that Marseille's 20mm nose gun had jammed after having fired just ten shells and that only 180 rounds of MG17 ammo had been expended. This was as sensational as the six victory rolls that he had made over the base before landing. What's more, none of the 'Stukas' were lost. Marseille had become a legend.

ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS

The problem with legends is that they come under the fine scrutiny of history. The popular version of that day has been aired a number of times in publications around the world. These versions do not agree with the authoritative *Jagdgeschwader 27*, written by Hans Ring and Werner Girbig and published in 1971. This makes no mention of the British fighters going into a 'Lufbery'-type defensive circle. Instead it notes that the enemy were flying "in Reihe", in series or succession, when shot down.

In 1969 British air combat historian Christopher Shores, in collaboration with German historian Hans Ring, produced *Fighters over the Desert, The Air Battles in the Western Desert, June 1940 to December 1942*. In diary format, the authors attempted to match the combat claims and losses of the

opposing sides. As far as could be determined, the only Allied unit that could be identified as having been engaged over Bir Hacheim at the time of Marseille's claims was 5 Squadron, South African Air Force, with Tomahawk IIb's.

'STUKA' HUNTING

What *actually* happened to 5 Squadron on that day? At around midday a call came through to 233 (F) Wing at Gambut, Libya, for a sweep to Bir Hacheim. Although nominally an RAF Wing, 233 was composed of three SAAF and one RAF fighter squadrons. The CO, RAF Wg Cdr Barney Beresford, designated 2 'Flying Cheetah' Squadron SAAF with Kittyhawks as top cover, while he took the lead with 12 Tomahawks of 5 Squadron.

The sortie started badly with an inadvertent taxiing collision in the swirling dust between two Tomahawks. Another aborted 30 minutes later with mechanical trouble; that left nine.

No.2 Squadron took up its top cover 'slot' at about 10,500ft. The pilots were naturally concentrating on the sky above for the inevitable 'bounce' by the faster '109s. It was vital to spot them in time to be able to execute a snappy 'turnabout' at the right moment to parry the thrust. But the 'bounce', when it came, was by two Italian Macchi

C.202 Folgores. Watching the broken clouds above, Lt Harold McMaster quickly turned into the Macchis and snapped off "a good poop" before the enemy disengaged. While concentrating on the threat expected from above, the 'Flying Cheetahs' lost contact with 5 Squadron below.

Pushing on to 'Bir Hak', the remaining nine Tomahawks of 5 Squadron suddenly came roaring over the French positions just as the 'Stukas' were pulling out of their dives and heading home. At full throttle, and without regard for the escorting '109s, 'Wingco' Beresford led 5 into an attack on the dive-bombers – the purpose of the mission.

There was no time to look about, and the Tomahawks got stuck into the fleeing 'Stukas' straight away. No defensive circle was formed – such a tactic was anathema to Major 'Jack' Frost (5's CO) and Wg Cdr Beresford, both aggressive combatants. So much for the popular German version of this famous combat!

COOLING DOWN

All but two of 5's pilots are



Left
A SAAF Tomahawk IIb in the Western Desert circa 1941-1942.

Below left
Capt Robin Pare DFC, a fighter 'ace' of the East African campaign 1940-1941, seated in Lt P H Saunders' Tomahawk 'Shirley III'.

Below
Capt Louis Cecil 'Cookie' Botha who scored the 'hat-trick' on June 3.

"Starting with victory number 70 at 12:22 (German standard time), he scored four more times, with an even pace, at 12:25, 12:27, 12:28 and 12:29. He was decimating the Curtiss fighters"





known to have engaged the 'Stukas'. In the battle that followed, seven registered claims for Ju 87s shot down. They could not have been in the neat circle or row described in the popular accounts, wherein Marseille's victims never managed to engage the dive-bombers. Having disposed of a Ju 87, Frost tangled inconclusively with Bf 109s before breaking off.

Capt Louis Botha scored a 'hat-trick' by shooting down three 'Stukas', having avoided a pass by a Bf 109 in the process. With his ammunition expended, he found that his engine temperature was sky high – and little wonder as he had been flying with the throttle 'through the gate' [maximum power]. The fight was over by then and Botha, very professionally, landed in the desert to allow his

engine to cool off. He then took off again and flew back to base. His fighter, Tomahawk IIb AK448 'GL-H', was not damaged, much less destroyed, as has been claimed in the popular accounts of the Marseille combat.

While the squadron's war diary for June does not mention his late arrival in its narrative section, his sortie report is appended and gives the full story. The Form 541 clearly shows his (undamaged) late return at 14:45. The collective Sortie Report (Form 441A) for the mission makes no mention of any damage to his aircraft, nor does the daily operations summary which had to give a scrupulously precise account of each day's losses and expenditures of fuel, ammunition, etc.

This return was forwarded in quadruplicate to HQ RAF Middle

East, Air HQ Western Desert, 211 Group and 233 Wing's HQ. There was no such thing as 'admitting' or 'omitting' anything – units were required to give all the facts; it was a matter of procedure.

Botha flew the same fighter in combat again next day. [Tomahawk AK448 was transferred to the Royal Egyptian Air Force on September 1, 1943 - Ed.] The claim that he and his aircraft were Marseille's sixth victory in the June 3 action is clearly a mistake.

THREE DOWN

But five fighters *were* lost. When Beresford, Frost, and Lt Gaymans landed, followed some 45 minutes later by Botha, they were considerably taken aback, realising that five of their mates had not made it. What had happened to



"Capt Louis Botha scored a 'hat-trick' by shooting down three 'Stukas', having avoided a pass by a Bf 109 in the process. With his ammunition expended, he found that his engine temperature was sky high – and little wonder as he had been flying with the throttle 'through the gate' [maximum power]"



The first casualty was most likely 2nd Lt J M S Martin, who went down over Bir Hacheim itself, where he was picked up by the French. (He later rejoined his unit.) The remaining four losses suffered by 5 Squadron fell beyond 'Bir Hak' while pursuing the fleeing 'Stukas'.

When Lt Cecil Golding careered onto the dive-bomber formation, looking for a target, he was startled by a Bf 109 with a bright yellow nose and a black spinner that fired and missed him, then hung onto his wing before breaking away. Black spinners with the underside of the nose in yellow were characteristics of JG53 markings at that time.

Popular renditions of the colour schemes for the various *Gelbe 14* Bf 109Fs of I/JG27, flown by Marseille, show them with either a yellow or a white spinner. Not *black* as Golding reported seeing in the heat of battle.

Golding attacked and shot down a Ju 87. Then he was hit by the fire of an aircraft behind him. His control stick was smashed by a cannon shell, splinters embedding in his legs. Being very low, he crash-landed immediately – probably by

trimming nose-up – the Tomahawk coming to rest close to the 'Stuka' that he had just shot down.

He saw that Bob Morrison had also crash-landed nearby. Although both were wounded, they quickly ran over to the burning wreck of the Junkers. They found the gunner dead and the wounded pilot struggling to escape the flames; they pulled him free.

Cecil Golding received a letter from the Ju 87 pilot, Hans Diebel, in 1953. Diebel stated that he had been joined in the prisoner of war camp in Canada by Oblt Friedrich Körner of 2/JG27 who had also participated in the fight over Bir Hacheim that day. Körner, a 36 victory 'ace', told Diebel that he had seen a 'Stuka' shot down in flames by a Curtiss and had, in turn, shot down the fighter. They concluded that this had been Diebel and Golding.

While this is most likely true, there is also the probability that Golding might have been shot down by the wingman of the JG53 pilot that attacked but missed him.

Golding and Morrison were joined within half a minute by Viv Muir, who had also come down nearby after shooting up a Ju

Left
Marseille's red ruddered Bf 109, with 50 victory markings, circa February 1942. PETE WEST

Below
Kittyhawks of 2 Squadron lined up for a desert scramble, summer 1942.

Bottom
Major J E 'Jack' Frost DFC* who led 5 Squadron on June 3.

87. It might seem, at first glance, that these three Tomahawks may well have been shot down by Marseille, thus according with his third, fourth and fifth claims of the "circling Curtisses".

However, the close proximity of the crash-landings, and the elapsed time of something like two minutes at most for all three, would suggest that more than one Bf 109 was involved. The stated times of Marseille's victories do not accord with two aircraft being shot down almost simultaneously, followed by a third less than a minute later.

The three Tomahawks were not flying in a circle so as to account for their 'arrivals' so close together. Nor were they flying in a neat row while chasing the Ju 87s.

AND TWO MORE

Only some of the accounts of this action note that Marseille was not the only JG27 pilot to claim, or that JG27 was not the sole Luftwaffe fighter unit involved. Pilots of III/JG53 shot down three of six enemy aircraft encountered. They certainly appear to have tried to stick with the Tomahawks as they charged through the Ju 87 formation.

To avoid attacks from underneath, 'Stuka' formations at that time tended to get down as low as





Above
Tomahawk AN431 'GL-S'
after colliding with 'GL-O'
(behind).

Below
Tomahawk IIb AN427
'GL-D' survived with 5
Squadron SAAF from April
to at least October, 1942.

possible. All three Tomahawks had been at such low altitude in their pursuit of the Ju 87s that they had belly-landed directly on being hit. Versions of the Marseille story place the Curtisses at 3,500ft (in the circle) or at 2,625ft while flying one behind the other. None indicate that Marseille had to go down to less than 1,000ft to get at least three of his victories.

Not long after they had been brought down, the three SAAF pilots and their prisoner heard the howl of



Tell-tale SPINNERS

The spinner fitted to the Bf 109 that attacked Lt Golding on June 3 had been painted black, meaning that it belonged to III/JG53 and not I/JG27, as the latter's spinners were painted white. Illustrated above is pilot Lt Ken Clarkson of 4 Squadron SAAF with a captured example from I/JG27. Below is a captured former JG53 Bf 109F ready for a test flight with 4 Squadron SAAF in January, 1943.



"...the three SAAF pilots and their prisoner heard the howl of the Allison engine of a Tomahawk in a screaming dive. It crashed in their vicinity and exploded"



the Allison engine of a Tomahawk in a screaming dive. It crashed in their vicinity and exploded. The pilot was not seen to bale out. As there were no other losses, this *had* to be Capt Robin Pare, the East African veteran and 'ace' - the sole fatality on this 5 Squadron mission. He was the last to fall.

Marseille's final victim of the series, scored at 12:33 was the one

Below
Marseille changed aircraft in the Spring of 1942, although he kept his lucky 'Yellow 14' marking.
PETE WEST

neither loss nor gain. This left 5 Squadron, after the take-off accident and the subsequent abort by a singleton, with only 9 Tomahawks.

Only 16 SAAF fighters are known to have been involved in this mission, of which nine were actually engaged with the 'Stukas' and Bf 109s. The only explanation of the figure of 35 would appear to be that

balanced against 5 Squadron's loss of five machines. (Körner's claim appears to have been ignored by the Luftwaffe.)

CROWDED MINUTES

Something went seriously wrong with either German or RAF record-keeping for June 3. It is difficult to imagine Marseille's clinically precise attacks as described in



that was last seen losing altitude and trailing smoke. That could not have been Pare, who crashed vertically. It seems more likely that he fell either to one of the JG53 claimants or to Uffz H Gierster of II/JG27, who claimed a 'Kittyhawk' at 12:35.

NUMBERS GAME

German versions claim that around 35 British fighters were involved in the battle. The supposition has been made that there were RAF aircraft accompanying the two SAAF units, but none were noted by the SAAF pilots. Certainly no mention of the RAF joining the interception had been made at the briefing.

No.2 Squadron's top cover formation - which consisted of seven Kittyhawk Is - had a brush with only two enemy fighters, believed to be Italian, and then drifted out of the picture, with

Above
Ju 87D
'S7+EP' of
6/StG.3
(S7+EP)
found
abandoned in
the desert in 1942.



the JG27 historians have added the total of enemy fighters believed to have been encountered on both this *and* an earlier escort mission.

The JG27 unit history claims that the Marseille staffel prevented the '35' attackers from shooting down any of the 'Stukas' is a misrepresentation. In the confusion of the swift and sharp attack by 5 Squadron it would have been almost inevitable that over-claiming would occur, so possibly fewer than the ten 'Stukas' claimed as shot down actually fell - although they were supposedly all confirmed by the army. Two 'Stuka' pilots and a gunner were killed, while one pilot and one gunner were captured.

The total of ten German claims - six by Marseille, one by Gierster and three by III/JG53 - have to be

the German accounts of the Bir Hacheim air battle, while the onrushing, desperately weaving Tomahawk-Stuka-JG53 brawl was taking place - and, as was so common in such battles, spreading out across the sky.

Nor would the 'Stukas' have hung around like ducks in a shooting gallery for Marseille to shoot down their assailants. A perpetually stationary Tomahawk-Stuka fight lasting 11 minutes, allowing Marseille to accomplish his singular exercise, seems improbable.

It is not impossible that Marseille could have achieved the feat that he claimed, as he was a brilliant pilot. But the details of his action over Bir Hacheim that day and those of the circumstances surrounding 5's involvement, just don't come together.

Unless some new evidence comes to light, the events of the German action during those crowded minutes above Bir Hacheim in the early afternoon of June 3, 1942, must remain clouded with doubt. The only thing that is certain is that Marseille did not score his fabled six victories against 5 Squadron.

The author acknowledges with gratitude the assistance of Cecil Golding in South Africa, and Andy Stewart in the UK. The information about Körner has only recently been discovered in the long-forgotten Golding-Diebel correspondence. Michael Schoeman is the author of Springbok Fighter Victory - SAAF Fighter Operations 1939-1945 which lists all known SAAF fighter claims and losses. ●