

LAST DAYS OF THE CONDOR

THE FOCKE-WULF Fw 200 IN LUFTWAFFE SERVICE, 1944–45



Described by Winston Churchill in the dark early days of the Second World War as the “Scourge of the Atlantic”, the far-ranging Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor was well past its prime by 1944. Luftwaffe specialist **CHRIS GOSS** describes the type’s final year in combat, during which its ultimate transformation from bird of prey to sitting duck was made complete

BY 1944 THE Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor had all but exceeded its sell-by date. At the end of November 1943, at long last and very late, the aircraft that would replace it as a long-range maritime reconnaissance and bomber aircraft, the Heinkel He 177, had become operational, despite its performance still being well below what was required. As a result, the ever-diminishing number of Condors would be required to soldier on for a while longer.

The only units that were still flying the Fw 200 in January 1944 were elements of *Kampfgeschwader 40* (KG 40) namely 3 *Staffel*/KG 40, commanded by the experienced *Hauptmann* Robert Maly, which was subordinated to III *Gruppe*/KG 40 commanded by *Hptm* Dr Lambert von Konsensegg. Maly’s unit was generally based in Norway while III *Gruppe* was based in south-west France.

January 5, 1944, saw a bad start to the year when frequent target Bordeaux-Mérignac airfield was bombed again, resulting in the destruction of some eight Condors with another three damaged. The first loss on operations then occurred less than two weeks later, on January 17, when the Condor commanded by *Oberleutnant* Ernst Rebensburg of 3./KG 40, operating out of Norway, failed to return from a reconnaissance sortie over Norway and Iceland.

With Allied air superiority on the increase, Condors in France were proving easy prey for RAF and USAAF long-range fighters. The first such Fw 200 loss of 1944 occurred on January 27, when *Flt Lt* Charles Scherf and *Fg Off* Al Brown in a de Havilland Mosquito of No 418 *Sqn* RCAF shot down a Condor of 9./KG 40 near Avord in central France, resulting in the deaths of *Oberfeldwebel* Willi Schmidt and four crew. The RAF combat report relates what happened:

“A Fw 200 was seen 12 miles [19km] ahead, south-east of Avord going west; *Flt Lt* Scherf turned sharply to starboard and attacked from astern, range 500yd, height 300ft [90m]; 7–8sec burst, strikes on port wing moving forward to fuselage; under-part of fuselage caught fire; *Wg Cdr* D.C.S. Macdonald took cine-camera shots.

“Pieces flew off and enemy aircraft levelled

out. As pilot was baling out, *Wg Cdr* fired at enemy aircraft and engine burst into flames; enemy aircraft crashed in wood, 1630hr.”

The last successful shipping attack by a Condor occurred at 1055hr on February 10, 1944. Three Fw 200s of 3./KG 40, led by Maly, flew over Seydisfjörður in eastern Iceland at 4,700ft (1,430m), dropping three bombs on ships in the harbour, one of the bombs exploding on the bow of the British oiler *El Grillo*. There were no casualties as a result of the attack but the *El Grillo* sank later the same day.

BLOODY BISCAI

The first Fw 200 combat loss over the Bay of Biscay occurred on February 12, 1944, when up to six Condors took off to attack a convoy 400 miles (640km) west of Cape Finisterre. In one of the Condors, flown by *Oblt* Günther Seide of *Stab* (HQ Flight) III./KG 40, was *Unteroffizier* Werner Zerrahn, who recalls:

“We had taken off with about five or six aircraft and on our way out we spotted some twin-engined ‘planes starboard ahead, assuming it would be our own escort of [Junkers] Ju 88s from I./ZG 1. However, these ‘planes now took an attacking position by flying a steep turn, and we realised they were enemy aircraft. As far as I remember, we were only attacked once; we escaped with minor damage. I suffered a bullet graze to my left foot and *Fw* Günther Hickmann, a radio operator in another aircraft, took a bullet through his left hand. On the ground we found out that we’d had a lot of luck, because we counted 130 bullet holes in our Condor.”

Zerrahn and his fellow Condor crew members had indeed been lucky, having been intercepted by three Mosquitoes of No 157 *Sqn*. Pilots *Flt Lts* Dick “Dolly” Doleman and Brian Whitlock and *Fg Off* Verdun Hannawin each shared the destruction of one Condor, which was flown by *Feldwebel* Karl-Heinz Schairer of 7./KG 40; he and his seven crew were all reported missing. Werner Zerrahn was probably wounded by Verdun Hannawin; the RAF combat report shows how one-sided the combats were:

“Doleman sighted aircraft on the starboard beam about four miles [7km] away and the three

OPPOSITE PAGE Originally designed as a long-range airliner, the Fw 200 prototype made its first flight on July 27, 1937, pre-production examples of the type demonstrating its remarkable range capabilities with a series of record-setting long-distance flights. This Fw 200C-4 military variant is seen at Værnes, Norway, in 1942. VIA AUTHOR



Mosquito XIX MM654 only ever operated with No 157 Sqn, and is seen here bearing the unit's RS code, in this case RS-N. On February 12, 1944, when three of its Mosquitoes attacked a formation of III/KG 40 Fw 200s over the Bay of Biscay, No 157 Sqn was operating on long-range sorties from Predannack in Cornwall.

Mosquitoes turned starboard towards them. The aircraft were seen to be five Fw 200s, four in 'V' formation and one straggling, flying at zero feet; our aircraft attacked from starboard in line astern, each opening fire at about 900yd, closing to 600yd. Strikes were scored on at least one enemy aircraft, the last on the starboard side of the V; Flt Lt Doleman broke away to port, the other two to starboard. Doleman and Hannawin re-formed and attacked again from the starboard quarter. As Flt Lt Doleman attacked, the inner starboard engine of the enemy aircraft damaged in the first attack caught fire and fire also broke out on the starboard side of the fuselage.

"When Fg Off Hannawin attacked, the flames spread all over the wing; the enemy aircraft made a gentle turn to starboard, lost height, hit the sea and immediately blew up. In the course of this attack, Fg Off Hannawin also scored strikes on the other aircraft on the starboard wing of the enemy formation; Fg Off Hannawin made two more attacks on the remaining four aircraft before setting course for base."

Encounters at sea were by now becoming rare for the Condors, RAF Coastal Command recording only three uneventful encounters with Fw 200s in 1944, these being off the Shetlands and over the Bay of Biscay. Meanwhile, Allied intruder attacks continued to result in losses of Condors and personnel.

STALKING THE CONVOYS

The end of March and start of April 1944 saw the last major combats between the Condors of KG 40 and Allied aircraft. On March 27 Allied convoy JW58/RA58 set sail with 49 ships, from Loch Ewe in Scotland to Murmansk in Russia. Within the massive escort were two carriers, *HMS Tracker* and *HMS Activity*, the former carrying the Grumman Wildcats of No 846 Sqn, and the latter the Wildcats of No 819 Sqn. The

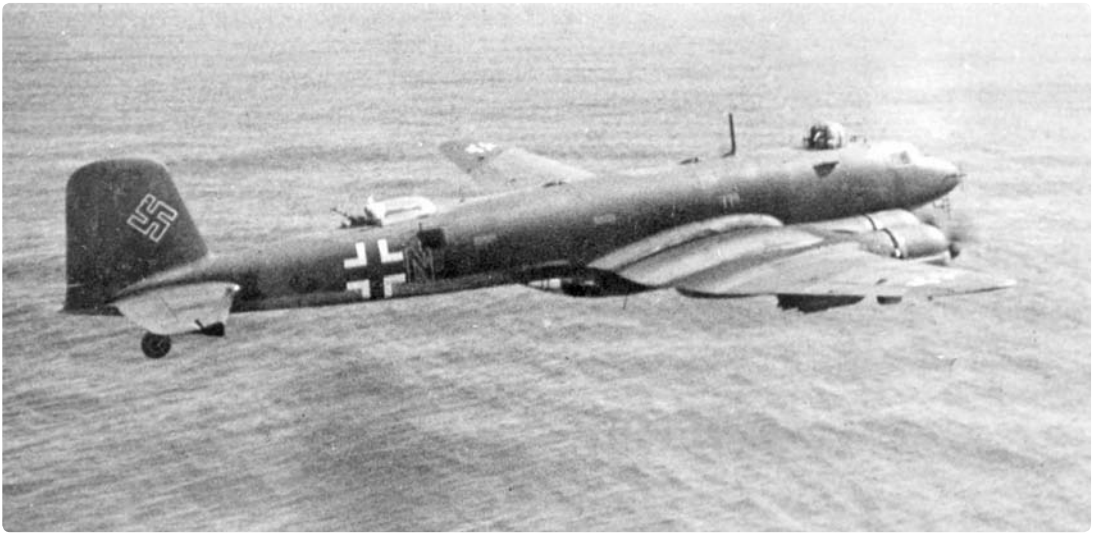
convoy was soon detected by the Luftwaffe, which began shadowing it and quickly began suffering losses. The first was a reconnaissance Ju 88D-1 of 1 *Staffel (Fern)/Aufklärungsgruppe 22* — 1.(F)/22 — flown by Fw Walter Kolb, shot down by Lts Jack Large and Dick Yeo of No 819 Sqn. However, the position of the convoy had been radioed back to base and, at first light the following morning, Condors were detected in the vicinity. At 0725hr Sub-Lts Noel Simon and Alan Swift of No 819 Sqn got airborne in their Wildcats to intercept an unidentified aircraft. Simon relates what happened next:

"Take-off from the pitching deck was rather hair-raising, and then for the best part of two hours we were vectored all over the sky at heights ranging from sea-level to 10,000ft [3,000m] . . . the cloud was so extensive that although we must have been close to the bandit on more than one occasion, we saw nothing of it. Eventually, with petrol running low and feeling thoroughly frustrated, we were recalled.

"[As we were] approaching the convoy a little below the cloudbase, fighter control suddenly piped up urgently with a fresh course to steer. As I turned on to the new heading, I spotted the dull grey form of a Condor several miles ahead, flying very low and away from me. Dropping to sea-level, I opened up to full throttle, switched on the gunsight and cocked the guns.

"I flew as low as I dared, virtually skimming the wavetops. The Condor continued on a steady course but as we drew near, it started a gentle turn to port. By then the range was closing rapidly and I could not believe that we hadn't been spotted. We were approaching so fast that at the last moment I had to throttle right back to avoid overshooting.

"Leaving my No 2 to take the port side, I concentrated on the starboard, almost immediately opening fire from astern and



ABOVE The unit that used the Condor more than any other, KG 40 was formed at Bordeaux-Mérignac in July 1940, operating as part of Fliegerführer Atlantik (Atlantic Command). This Fw 200C-6, WNr 0214 of 9./KG 40, is coded F8+NT; F8 was KG 40's identification code, T represented 9 Staffel and the N was the aircraft's individual code.

RIGHT Sub-Lieutenant Noel Simon was one of two pilots who intercepted a Fw 200 over the Svalbard archipelago while flying Grumman Wildcats with No 819 Sqn in March 1944. Simon later became a wildlife and conservation pioneer in Kenya.



slightly below. I was so close, the Condor's slipstream caught my aircraft, the turbulence momentarily throwing me off aim, but by then I could hardly miss. I saw my bullets raking the two starboard engines, both of which began to smoke. As they caught fire, the Condor's nose dipped and, almost as though in slow motion, plunged into the sea in a shower of spray. I had to pull sharply away to avoid following it into the water."

The Condor crashed at 0920hr south of Bear Island in the Norwegian Svalbard archipelago. Some seven hours later another Condor fell victim to Sub-Lts Gordon Debney and Reg Meed of No 846 Sqn, the Condor breaking up and falling into the sea at 1627hr. However, the day did not end there, as *HMS Tracker's* diary reveals:

"1800hr; Lt G.B.C. Sangster and Sub-Lt H. Beeston flew off to intercept a bandit. At 1820hr they spotted an Fw 200. First its port outer engine was set on fire, then starboard inner and then again the port outer which had been extinguished. The enemy cartwheeled into the sea and smoke could be seen from the ship."

It had been a dreadful day for the Condors. Although it is not possible to say who got what, the Condors flown by Ofw Alfred Weyer, Oblt Alfred Klomp and Uffz Alfred Göbel were all shot down, with the deaths of 20 aircrew.

Although Condors were sighted in the days that followed, no more were engaged or lost. However, the following evening, a Blohm und Voss Bv 138C-1 of 3.(F)/130, captained by Oblt Kurt Kannengiesser, fell victim to the Wildcats of Sub-Lt George Willcocks of No 846 Sqn and Lt John Scott of No 819 Sqn. A Ju 88D-1 of 1.(F)/22, flown by Fw Oswald Herpel, was shot down by Lts George Sangster and Wilfred Vittle of No 819 Sqn at 1650hr on April 2, 1944.

The U-boats fared little better, three Wolfpacks each of four submarines, plus another five additional U-boats being sent to intercept the convoy. No ships were hit and the convoy got



LEFT *The Condor could bite back if attacked, its defensive armament comprising one 7.9mm MG 15 machine-gun in the forward dorsal turret, one 13mm MG 131 in the rear dorsal turret, one 13mm MG 131 in each of the beam hatches (as seen here), one 20mm MG 151/20 cannon in the forward ventral position and one 7.9mm MG 15 in the aft ventral position.*

BELOW *The Condor was regularly beefed-up during its service career; early Fw 200As, Bs and Cs were powered by 850 h.p. BMW 132 engines, replaced from the Fw 200C-3 onwards with 1,000 h.p. Bramo 323R Fafnirs.*

through unscathed, but four of the U-boats were lost. On March 29 *U-961* was sunk by *HMS Starling*; on April 1 *U-355* was damaged by a Grumman Avenger of No 846 Sqn and then sunk by *HMS Beagle*; on April 2 *U-360* was sunk by *HMS Keppel*, and finally, on April 3 *U-288* was sunk by a Fairey Swordfish of No 819 Sqn in concert with the Avengers of No 846 Sqn. A total of 202 U-boat crewmen and 34 Luftwaffe aircrew died in futile attacks on this convoy.

SITTING DUCKS

It was clear that the Condors could no longer keep operating the same way — especially when, on March 20, 1944, III./KG 40 reported that of its 35 aircraft on strength, only eight were serviceable (three months later this had changed to 23 on strength, but with 12 serviceable). On April 1, 1944, *Fliegerführer Atlantik* (Atlantic Command) was disbanded, with KG 40 and other associated units now coming under *X Fliegerkorps*. From this point, Condor losses on operations dropped to zero, but many aircraft and crews were still being lost in accidents or falling victim to intruding Allied aircraft.

May 1944 saw two Condors lost in accidents, with the deaths of eight crew, and another two destroyed in June 1944, the worst occurring on the 14th when, during a transport flight, Ofw Hans Hauenstein's Condor of 9./KG 40 hit a tree landing at Roth in Germany, killing ten air- and groundcrew and injuring another two.

The final Condor intruder victim in France occurred on July 5, 1944. Feldwebel Otto Kipp was an experienced radio operator with III./KG 40, his operational flying career having started in Heinkel He 111s in the summer of 1941. Kipp recalls the events of July 5:

"We were ordered to fly to an auxiliary airfield located at the so-called Charentes meadows [in west-central France], [where] the aircraft would be protected from the daily fighter-bomber attacks. We took off early in the morning, [having] been told there were no enemy aircraft in our airspace. However, this proved to be wrong and we were attacked by a [Lockheed P-38] Lightning just after take-off, at an altitude of 160ft [50m]. Our 'plane burst into flames, so we had to make an emergency landing in a cornfield where farmers were harvesting."



Condor F8+UL of 3./KG 40 banks over a typically Norwegian landscape in 1944. While the type enjoyed a period of great success in the early days of the Battle of the Atlantic, when British convoys sailed with little or no air defence, by the end of 1942 the Fw 200 had lost its advantage as an effective anti-shipping weapon owing to vast improvements in Allied shipping defences.



The Condor's attacker was Capt Art Jeffrey of the 434th Fighter Squadron (FS), 479th Fighter Group. Some 13 P-38s of the 434th FS arrived over Cognac just after 0900hr and immediately spotted the Condor taking off; the result was inevitable, as Jeffrey's combat report reveals:

"My right wingman called over the radio that a 'plane was taking off. Since my Flight was closest, I called *Newcross Leader* to furnish top cover while I went down for a pass. The 'plane had made a 180° turn to port and was staying on the deck, close to the aerodrome and town. There was quite a lot of flak being shot at us from this area. I came at the enemy aircraft from the front, making a 180° overhead pass and setting up for a stern shot at him.

"I began firing at about 350yd, closing to about 50yd, giving him about a 10sec burst. The right [starboard] inboard engine caught fire immediately and parts flew off it. The pilot then made a belly landing, and by the time the ship had stopped skidding, the whole 'plane was ablaze. I observed one man making his escape from the front of the ship."

Amazingly, half of the crew emerged from the rear of the burning Condor without injury; the three that were wounded, including Otto Kipp, had only light injuries. The mechanic, Uffz Otto Kiphut, was killed by a single bullet to the head.

A TACTICAL WITHDRAWAL

In the wake of the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, Condors were no longer able to operate from French bases. As a result, the following month the decision was made to withdraw them to Norway, Germany or Austria. They would henceforth be used only in the transport role, that for which they had originally been designed, as it was impossible to perform effective combat sorties with any guarantee of success — or even of getting back in one piece.

Losses continued. On July 9, 1944, Lt Helmut Kütterer of 7./KG 40, who had been shot down by American fighters on March 5, crashed into a mountain at Saint-Nicolas-des-Biefs, north-east of Clermont-Ferrand, while on a ferrying flight; 12 air- and groundcrew were killed.

Meanwhile, having moved to Norway, III./KG 40 was still trying to continue as an effective operational unit. On August 14, experienced pilot Oblt Rudolf Biberger was introducing a new crew from 8./KG 40 to the Trondheim area, only for the Condor to hit the ground during a turn, probably caught in a gust coming off a mountain. Six crew, including Biberger, were killed, and one was injured.

Despite all this doom and gloom, there was the occasional success for the Condor. Oberleutnant Karl-Heinz Stahnke was a highly experienced transport pilot who had transferred to 3./KG 40 in the spring of 1943. As well as performing normal Condor sorties, he was also tasked with reconnaissance and resupply missions to weather stations in the Polar Region.

One such weather station, *Schatzgräber* (Treasure Hunter), was located on Alexandra Land, the most westerly island of Franz Josef Land, and had been operating under the noses of the Soviets since September 1943. In early July 1944 it was discovered that nine of the ten-man detachment had fallen very ill as a result of eating polar-bear meat. Ice prevented seaplanes or boats from getting there, so on July 7 Stahnke took off from Banak in northern Norway. After an 8hr flight Stahnke landed on what appeared to be a suitable landing area, three miles from the weather station.

The inner tyre of the starboard mainwheel unit and the tailwheel were damaged during the landing, and the Condor ran into a dip, tipping on to its nose and back again, after which it sank up to its axles in melting ice. Nevertheless, a



ABOVE Bristol Beaufighter VI KV912 was one of more than 100 radar-equipped examples supplied to the USAAF for nightfighting duties in the European theatre of operations. It was one of these machines, operating with the 415th Night Fighter Squadron, that dispatched Fw 200D-2 D-AMHL, named Pommern, on September 27, 1944.

party from the aircraft, including a doctor, made it to the weather station and began treating the sick crew.

Stahnke had now to get home again. On July 8, a Blohm und Voss Bv 222 flying-boat dropped aircraft spares, and over the next two days the crew repaired the Condor and created an obstacle-free strip on the ice. Finally, on the evening of July 10, after a hair-raising take-off, the Condor plus passengers set course for Banak, landing there without incident the next morning. Stahnke was subsequently awarded the *Ritterkreuz* on October 24, 1944.

Such successes were the exception to the rule, however. The last Condor to be shot down was lost at the end of September 1944. *Flugkapitän* Helmut Liman was a pre-war Deutsche Luft Hansa (DLH) pilot who flew operationally with 7./KG 40, but had transferred back to DLH. On September 27 Liman was at the controls for a passenger flight from Stuttgart to Spain in a Fw 200D-2. At 2031hr the Condor was intercepted by a Bristol Beaufighter of the USAAF's Corsica-based 415th Night Fighter Squadron, crewed by Capt Harold Augspurger and 2nd Lt Austin Petry, who shot down the Fw 200, which crashed at Saint-Nicolas-lès-Cîteaux, south of Dijon. The crew of three plus five passengers were all killed.

CLOSE TO EXTINCTION

For the remaining six-and-a-half months of the war the Fw 200 was all but extinct. Condors were now solely performing transport tasks, but even then losses occurred. One particularly tragic loss happened on October 11, when a Condor of 7./KG 40, flown by Lt Hans Gilbert, crashed south of Bardufoss in northern Norway. The cause was structural failure owing to the aircraft being overloaded; the Condor was carrying five crew and 46 passengers, 41 of which were German

female auxiliaries. There were no survivors.

On October 21 a Condor being flown by Ofw Wolfgang Liepe of 7./KG 40 crashed on take-off from Nautsi on the Norwegian/Finnish/Russian border while on a transport flight. Three crew, including Liepe, were killed and three injured.

November 1944 would finally see KG 40 disbanded — in over-optimistic preparation for the formation of the Messerschmitt Me 262-equipped KG (Jagd) 40 — and its aircraft and personnel dispersed to other units or grounded. Condor unit 8./KG 40 became *Transportfliegerstaffel Condor* and was commanded by Hptm Ludwig Progner, formerly of 7./KG 40. Some aircraft were transferred to 14./*Transportgeschwader 4* at Wiener-Neustadt in Austria, where two Condors formed a *Sonderkommando* (Special Unit) commanded by Oblt Karl-Heinz Stahnke, the other pilot being Ofw Adalbert Schraffanek. This unit's main claim to fame is that it was involved in the last recorded RAF combat with a Condor, albeit with the latter on the ground and the results of which were inconclusive.

The RAF had become aware of regular transport flights by Condors between Wiener-Neustadt or Horsching in Austria and Calato airfield on Rhodes in Greece. The precise purpose of these sorties (the first being recorded by the Allies on January 28, 1945) was unknown, but it was thought that they were probably part of preparations for an attack on the Suez Canal with Henschel Hs 293 anti-shiping remotely-guided missiles.

At 2345hr on March 30, 1945, Stahnke, who had been awarded the *Eichenlaub* (Oak Leaves) to his *Ritterkreuz* three days before, took off from Wiener-Neustadt, arriving at Calato just before dawn on March 31. The Condor, together with an He 111 and a Junkers Ju 52/3m, was spotted



LEFT In an attempt to increase the Condor's waning offensive capability, the type was modified to carry a single Henschel HS 293 guided bomb beneath each of the outer engine nacelles. This Fw 200C-8, WNr 0256, has been converted into a Fw 200C-5/FK for Hs 293 operations. The Hohentwiel antenna array on the nose is clearly visible, as is the cabin heating system air inlet on the underside of the aircraft's large offset-to-starboard ventral gondola.

BELOW Peekaboo! In this dramatic still from gun-camera footage taken by one of the Beaufighters of No 252 Sqn during the raid on Calato airfield on Rhodes on March 31, 1945, Karl-Heinz Stahnke's Condor is visible between the trees rather primitively camouflaged with a few tarpaulins and some tree branches. Amazingly, the Beaufighter pilots failed to see the Condor, which was coded G6+AY of 14./Transportgeschwader 4.





ABOVE Oberleutnant Karl-Heinz Stahnke (third from right) and his crew at Værnes in April 1944. Stahnke joined 3./KG 40 in the spring of 1943 and went on to become one of the most experienced Fw 200 pilots of the war, participating in numerous Condor operations, including perilous resupply flights to weather stations in the Arctic.

on the ground by an Allied photo-reconnaissance aircraft. As a result, six Beaufighters of No 252 Sqn, based at Hassani in Greece and led by Sqn Ldr Tony Hunter, lifted off at 1450hr the same day with the intent of destroying the German aircraft at Calato.

This was not the first time No 252 Sqn had been after a Condor on Rhodes. On March 17 Fg Off Doug Reid DFM and Fg Off Ron Ray DFM undertook a recce sortie to locate Stahnke's Condor, which had arrived two days before. They saw nothing, suggesting that the Condor must have been well camouflaged, as it took off for Austria the following day.

On arriving at Calato, the Beaufighter crews saw nothing, so promptly attacked buildings on the airfield with their cannon, experiencing moderate to heavy flak in return, which damaged Fg Off J.K. Underwood's Beaufighter in the tail, the nose of Flt Sgt L.G. Armitage's aircraft and the undercarriage of Fg Off Bill Escreet's mount. All six landed back at base

safely, the gun-camera film taken by Reid revealing, to everyone's great annoyance, the Condor cleverly camouflaged among a grove of olive trees. Stahnke took off that evening.

As a postscript, at the end of the war the Allies discovered Condor G6+FY, together with Schaffranek and his crew, at Calato, where the latter had arrived on May 3, 1945.

The last recorded wartime Condor flights occurred on May 8, 1945. An Fw 200 of Transportfliegerstaffel Condor, flown by Ofw Willi Bergen, took off from Værnes, near Trondheim, then diverted from its intended destination of Kurland, near Oslo, to Achmer in Germany. On the same day, Uffz Harald Loseke from the same unit landed his Condor at Torslanda in Sweden with six crew/passengers from Transportfliegerstaffel Condor and reconnaissance unit 1(F)./22. Although the aircraft was later seen in RAF markings, it was, like all Condors found languishing on airfields around Europe, later scrapped.



Photographed at Torslanda, near Gothenburg in Sweden, by British aviation journalist John Stroud during a Scandinavian tour in the summer of 1946, Fw 200C-3/U1 WNr 0191, F8+MS (later G6+ST), has had its German markings painted over. Despite being in what appears to be remarkably good condition, it was scrapped in 1948.

JOHN STROUD © A FLYING HISTORY LTD

