



# Head TO He



**Above**  
A He 111P-2 of 7/KG 55, June 1941. © IGOR ZLOBIN 2017

**Below**  
He 111s of KG 55 taking off on the morning of June 22, 1941.

**P**lanning was meticulous: the invasion of the Soviet Union – Operation Barbarossa – was the summation of all of Germany’s extensive military experience and success. The plan was to be conducted over a vast area and every element of it was

command of Luftflotte 4 assigned units of V Air Corps, headquartered in the small Polish town of Zamość, 30 miles (50km) from the Soviet frontier, to support the offensive.

Chiefs at V Air Corps apparently believed the Air Force of the Kiev Special Military District was mainly deployed on airfields south of the Sokal-

18, 1941 and arrived at Klemensów airfield to prepare for operations.

Stationed near the southern panzerschtrasse, along which the 11th Panzer Division of the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps planned to advance, was the Soviet 46th Fighter Regiment. As of early summer 1941, the 46th was in rather good shape. Throughout 1940, the crews had flown 3,331hrs 20mins; an average of 50 flying hours per pilot. Training activities included monthly live firing at both towed drogues and ground targets, and simulated air-to-air combats.

This achievement was a source of satisfaction for the newly appointed Regiment



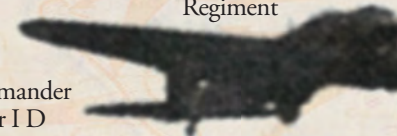
subjected to minute scrutiny. The massive war machine was due to roll eastwards on June 26, 1941.

Examples of this organisation were the two principal panzerschtrasse – tank routes – selected for the German Army Group South’s armoured and motorised units. The more northerly route ran east via Vladimir, Volodymyr-Volynsky and Lutsk; the other in the south also ran east and linked Sokal, Radziechów and Dubno. The

Radziechów-Brody-Tarnopol route. These bases were where the Soviet fighters were expected to concentrate and so were prioritised during the first part of the operation.

This led to the assignment of rather meagre forces – all bomber – to tackle the airfields near Kovel, Lutsk and Dubno: Kampfgeschwader (KG) 54 with 74 Junkers Ju 88s, and III Gruppe of KG 55 (III/KG 55) with 25 Heinkel He 111s. Under the command of the experienced Hauptmann (Hptm) Heinrich Wittmer, III/KG 55 left Gleiwitz prior to June

Commander Major I D Podgorny, and Deputy Regiment Commander J I Geibo, also recently transferred to his post. The leaders of the 46th were combat hardened. Major Podgorny had participated in the Soviet-Japanese Battles of Khalkhin Gol in 1939. Captain Geibo had flown more





# Lead

HAUPTMANN HEINRICH WITTMER WAS ASTOUNDED AT THE OPPOSITION CAPTAIN JOSEPH GEIBO HURLED AT HIS HEINKELS. MIKHAIL TIMIN DESCRIBES AN INTENSE BATTLE ON THE FIRST DAY OF BARBAROSSA



than 200 combat sorties during the Khalkhin Gol conflict and the Winter War with Finland from November 1939 to March 1940, and was credited with several victories. The leader of the 3rd Squadron, Captain N M Zverev, and Deputy Squadron Leader Senior Lieutenant (Sr Lt) S L Maksimenko, had fought in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

By June 22, 1941 all units of the regiment had been redeployed to Mlynów airfield in Poland, as construction of a concrete runway had begun at Dubno in Western Ukraine 290 miles away.

## OBSOLETE EQUIPMENT

The 46th Regiment's weak point was its equipment. The 1st and 2nd Squadrons flew obsolete Polikarpov I-16 Type 5 and Type 10 'Ratas'. These squat monoplanes were no match for the Messerschmitt Bf 109F-1s or 'F-2s' they would face.

During the summer of 1940 the regiment was to have received the modern Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-1 fighter, under the Workers



**Above**  
Polikarpov I-153 'Red 63' of the 46th Fighter Regiment, Mlynów, June 22, 1941. © A KAZAKOV 2017

**Left centre**  
Deputy Regiment Commander Captain Joseph Ivanovich Geibo.

**Left**  
Oberstleutnant Heinrich Wittmer.

and Peasants Red Army Air Force Re-Equipment Plan. Delays in finalising the prototypes and launching mass manufacture at Aviation Factory No.1 meant that the new monoplanes never arrived. Instead of the MiGs, the 3rd and 4th Squadrons of the 46th were equipped in summer 1940 with Polikarpov I-153 biplanes.

As of June 22, 1941, there were 29 I-16s and 18 I-153s at Mlynów. Another eight I-153s were left in Dubno for flight commander training. Apart from the combat aircraft, the regiment had other Polikarpov types – two I-15bis 'Chaika' fighter biplanes, five UTI-4 biplane trainers, seven UT-1 monoplane trainers and four U-2 liaison types. ➔

**"The 1st and 2nd Squadrons flew obsolete Polikarpov I-16 'Ratas'. These squat monoplanes were no match for the Messerschmitt Bf 109F-1s or 'F-2s' that they would face"**



**Above**  
Commander of the  
46th Fighter Regiment  
Major Ivan Dmitriyevich  
Podgorny.

**“Directive No.1 was inconsistent. In particular, it stated that Soviet pilots should not ‘respond to provocations’ and might attack solely in response to fire from the German side”**

On the morning that Barbarossa was to be unleashed, the 46th was not fully manned having lost a dozen experienced pilots to newly established units in May and June. However, this did not reduce combat effectiveness, as of the remaining 64 pilots, 48 had been serving with the regiment for over a year. There were only 16 ‘newbies’ who had arrived from flying schools not long before.

**UNDERMANNED SQUADRONS**

Hptm Wittmer of III/KG 55 was facing serious problems fulfilling the set task. According to the received orders, he was to simultaneously strike at five airfields: Dubno, Mlynów, Brody, Rachin (under construction on the northeast edge of Dubno) and Adamy.

On the morning on June 22, Wittmer had only 20 crews at his disposal and to be able to attack

all the assigned targets, he split his undermanned squadrons into small groups – pairs or fours. This was a very dangerous strategy, but he did not have much choice; it was a calculated risk.

Each of the He 111s was equipped to strafe grounded aircraft and carried 32 SD-50 110lb (50kg) fragmentation bombs. Some of the bombers were fitted with MG-FF cannons.

Reconnaissance inaccuracies meant that the Luftwaffe regarded Dubno and Rachin airfields as operational, whereas they were under construction. This error brought about an unnecessary dispersion of forces.

The die was cast. Between 02:50 and 03:15 hours Berlin time, the Gruppe began to get airborne. The operations record book (Kriegstagebuch – KTB) of III/KG 55 detailed the plan: “It was expected that 17 aircraft of the Gruppe would depart. Due to technical reasons, two failed to take-off; one returned because of engine

troubles. Targets: Dubno, Mlynów, Brody, and Rachin airfields. Attack time: 03:50 to 04:20. Flight altitude: treetop. Attack mode: In fours or pairs...”

So, III Gruppe’s sortie was not as envisaged from the very beginning: only 14 aircraft took part.

**DIRECTIVE NO.1**

Barbarossa became a reality in the skies over Mlynów on June 22 when the first Luftwaffe aircraft approached, according to Geibo’s memoirs at approximately 04:20. (This article will continue using Moscow time, Berlin was one hour behind.)

All the units of the Kiev Special Military District Air Force were alerted between 03:00 and 04:00 as soon as the district headquarters received the text of Directive No.1. Thus, crews managed to prepare for operations before the first raids.

As early as June 15, on the order of the District Air Force Commander



General E S Ptukhin, aircraft had been dispersed on airfields. However, it would be inaccurate to say that the Kiev district was at a state of maximum readiness.

As issued by the People's Commissariat of Defense, Directive No.1 was inconsistent. In particular, it stated that Soviet pilots should not "respond to provocations" and might attack solely in response to fire from the German side. On the first day of

the war, such instructions proved fatal for several Red Army Air Force units, as their aircraft were destroyed on the ground and several pilots were shot down.

A few commanders of different rank took the responsibility to give direct orders to fend off the Luftwaffe. Among them was Colonel I A Zykanov, of the 14th Combined Air Division.

Zykanov was a distinguished combat leader and an experienced pilot. Thanks to his resoluteness and composure, the first assaults by the Luftwaffe on the division's airfields were successfully repelled.

Orders were given to shoot down German aircraft as soon as air observation, information and liaison posts reported them crossing the Soviet frontier. Zykanov's firm decision saved the 46th Fighter Regiment from a surprise attack at the last minute.

Geibo remembered: "If any German aircraft appear, shoot them down! Something clicked in the telephone receiver, and the conversation broke off. 'How is it – shoot them down?' I asked worriedly. 'Comrade Colonel, please repeat! Do you really mean that we must shoot them down instead of driving them out?'"

### PROTECTING THE MOTHERLAND

Geibo not only assumed full responsibility for what happened but personally led the alert flight to intercept the Germans. He promptly grasped the situation, and held off the first strike by engaging the Luftwaffe bombers en route.

"In front of me there were four twin-engined bombers with black crosses painted on their wings... 'Attacking; provide cover!' I signalled to my group. In a quick manoeuvre, I set the cross-hairs of the aiming sight on the

lead German aircraft...

"Then I pulled the trigger of the ShKAS machine guns. Tracer bullets ripped the fuselage of the enemy aircraft; it lurched somewhat reluctantly, winged over and swooped down. Bright flames shot up from the place where it fell, and a column of black smoke began to creep up into the sky. I glanced at the clock. It was 4:20 in the morning ..."

According to an extract from the regiment's operations record book, Geibo was credited with a victory over the He 111. Furthermore, he remembers that after he disengaged, other pilots took on the Germans and dispatched another two of them. According to regimental documents, alert flight leader Sr Lt Simon Lavrovich Maksimenko also shot down an He 111.

Geibo gave orders to provide cover for Mlynów and Dubno. A fighter group, led by Sr Lt I I Ivanov set out to protect Dubno. The regiment's operations record book noted a combat involving Ivanov and lieutenants Yuryev and Kondranin:

"At 04:55 at an altitude of 1,500m to 2,000m, on a mission sortie to cover Dubno airfield, the pilots noticed three He 111s, which were going to carry out bombing. The fighters performed nose-down pitching to attack the He 111s from behind and opened fire.

"Upon running out ammunition, Sr Lt Ivanov rammed an He 111 through. The German aircraft fell at a distance of 5km from Dubno. Ivanov was killed while protecting the Motherland. The mission of providing cover for the airfield is complete. The He 111s left westward. The used-up ammunition totalled 1,500 ShKAS shells. Sr Lt Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov ➔

Left

Polikarpov I-6 'Red 19' of the 46th Fighter Regiment, Mlynów, June 22, 1941. © A KAZAKOV 2017

Left to right

Commander of the 14th Combined Air Division Colonel Ivan Alekseyevich Zykanov.

Deputy Squadron Leader Sr Lt Simon Lavrovich Maksimenko.

Hero of the Soviet Union: Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov.

Below

An He 111 of 7/KG 55 which force-landed in June or July 1941 in the Ukraine. It featured a 20mm MG-FF cannon in the nose blister for strafing raids.





**Above**  
Luftwaffe reconnaissance photograph of Dubno and Rachin airfields in 1944.

**Right**  
Aerial photograph of Mlynów airfield after the raids on June 22, 1941.

According to indirect data, it was the pilots of 8 Staffel who stood out above the others. Staffel leader Hptm Knorr's logbook contains an entry regarding his sortie in He 111 'G1+ES' which left Klemensow at 04:06 and attacked at 05:14. Crews of the 92nd were alerted at 04:35, but Regiment Commander Major Yachmenev received different instructions from Major General Shevchenko from those given by Colonel Zykanov to Captain Geibo. Situation Report No.1 of the 6th Army Air Force Headquarters gives a dry account of the regiment's experiences during the first raid:

"At 05:00, a group of fighters [probably a mistake in reporting; the airfield was attacked by the He 111s - Author] appeared over Brody... They delivered two attacks on the aircraft located on the airfield. As a result, two I-153s, a U-2, and the field photo laboratory were burnt



was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union (posthumously)."

The ramming was witnessed by many of Ivanov's comrades-in-arms who were, at that time, in transit from Dubno to Mlynów. Other pilots of the 46th Fighter Regiment acted in a courageous manner. As a result, German bombers failed to hit either the aircraft or the hangars at Mlynów.

### CLAIM AND COUNTER CLAIM

Losses inflicted on III/KG55 were considerable, fully confirming the claims of Soviet pilots. Two He 111P-2s of the 7 Staffel failed to return: 2140 'G1+KR' and 1410 'G1+MR' with the loss of all five on each. Three more were damaged to a greater or lesser extent; one was burnt out after landing.

Tactical raids on Brody and Adamy helped to take the sting out of an otherwise disastrous debut. According to III/KG55 documents: "The attack on Brody airfield proved surprisingly successful. The bombs were dropped on the closely spaced aircraft. A lot of burning aircraft were noticed.

"At Rachin airfield, the bombs were dropped on spots where aircraft were

concentrated and on groups of closely spaced trucks. In total, over 50 enemy fighters and other aircraft were destroyed. [Rachin was under construction and the vehicles were probably away from the site and being looked after by the engineers. The aircraft losses almost certainly relate to the strike on Adamy.]

"Defence data: There are a lot of fighters in the target area. Fire from ground and anti-aircraft guns [is] sporadic. Victories scored: Two fighters were shot down using onboard weapons. Weather conditions: Scattered clouds.

"Approximately 100 aircraft were found on a large field north of Złoczew. Approximately 80 aircraft were detected at a field north of Brody-Kamenka motor road. The field was attacked as an alternate target. The bombs hit the target well. A Red fighter biplane appeared; on account of insufficient speed, it failed to overtake the He 111s..."

### EFFICIENT RAID

The raid on the 92nd Fighter Regiment at Brody was deemed extremely efficient by the Germans.

down. Two persons were killed; six persons were wounded.

"At 05:05, a squadron took off to counter the enemy aircraft. In the air-to-air combat, two He 111s were shot down. One of our aircraft did not come back to the home airfield; another one made a forced landing near Radziechów. The aircraft is damaged but the pilot is intact..."

Inconsistent instructions from the superior command brought about the death of an experienced pilot, veteran of the Battles of Khalkhin Gol and the Winter War; Lt Alexey Grigoryevich Kuzmenko. He tried to compel the German to land by manoeuvring his aircraft, but was shot down by the He 111's gunners.

It was sheer luck that the 92nd escaped with such small losses. Despite the triumphant reports



**“Tracer bullets ripped the fuselage of the enemy aircraft; it lurched somewhat reluctantly, winged over, and swooped down. Bright flames shot up from the place where it fell”**

lodged by German crews, the number of aircraft destroyed at Brody was minimal.

The two Heinkels mentioned in the situation report are open to doubt given that the intercepting I-153s failed to overtake the bombers. However, the regiment can probably be credited with He 111P-2 1494 ‘G1+KS’ of 8/KG 55 piloted by Oberleutnant Fahrholz, which had its undercarriage shot through in the combat. During an attempt to land back at Klemensow two crewmen were injured and the Heinkel was written off.

The raid on Adamy proved the most successful of all. Four fighters of the 23rd Fighter Regiment, 15th Combined Air Division, were burnt out and another 12 damaged.

This was no recompense for III/KG 55’s performance: out of the 14 departed He 111s, two failed to return; two more were written off, another two were damaged and some crew members were injured. The alleged destruction of 50 Soviet aircraft on the airfields as stated in the KTB seems an obvious attempt to ‘sweeten’ the disappointing defeat and the heavy losses suffered

by the Gruppe.

Hauptmann Wittmer’s personal courage could not be doubted, since he took part in the sortie. Faced with limited resources, the German commander had done his best to make up for the morning failures over Mlynów.

### INTERLUDE

While the crews of III/KG 55 were preparing for the next sortie, other units of the V Air Corps were operating in small groups over Soviet airfields. Between 09:30 and 10:00, a flight of four German bombers made a successful attack on Mlynów. An I-16 and a Polikarpov R-Zet (or R-Z) were destroyed and others damaged but later repaired.

Several pilots of the 46th Fighter Regiment tried to repel the raid: Deputy Leader of the 2nd Squadron Captain V M Kiselev, Lieutenants G A Lysenko and I S Babenko were shot down and killed and Junior Lieutenant (J/Lt) N P Kozinets was injured. Most probably, they fell victim to 5 Staffel of II/JG3, led by Hptm Lothar Keller. These units claimed five victories near Brody and

Dubno.

Despite these troubles, the 46th Fighter Regiments commander remained calm. The regiment confidently defended the airfield and continued to patrol the Dubno–Mlynów region. At the same time, heavy losses on the ground were avoided, and damaged aircraft were promptly repaired. Furthermore, a vital reserve force was permanently maintained.

### WITTMER’S RETURN

By 15:30, the headquarters of III/KG 55 was gearing up for a new offensive. Led by Hptm Wittmer, 18 He 111s departed for the sole target: Mlynów.

The Gruppe’s operations record book takes up the story: “At 15:45 the Gruppe, in close formation, attacked the airfield from an altitude of 1,000m. Half of the bombs were dropped on taxiing aircraft and those at take-off position. A quarter of the bombs were dropped on concentration [aircraft dispersal] sites on the eastern edge of the field. As far as we could observe, the concentration sites were still occupied with aircraft.”

**Above**

A Heinkel He 111 of KG 55 over Mlynów on the morning on June 22, 1941.



**“Negating the Germans’ triumphant reports, the pilots of the 46th Fighter Regiment managed again to provide cover for their airfield and to prevent the enemy from bombing”**

**Above**  
Framed by a biplane, an I-16 Type 5 amid the carnage at Mlynów airfield. The marking ‘H’ (Cyrillic N) stands for ‘Nelyotniy’ (‘non-airworthy’); such aircraft were used solely for ground training.

**Right**  
Ground crew cleaning up at Mlynów airfield after the attack on June 22.



“Details: Results were not observed because of severe attacks by fighters. An I-16 fighter was shot down. The crew witnessed its falling. Weather conditions: Good; with patchy clouds. Ammunition used up: 576 SD-50s.

“Losses: The aircraft of Gefreiter Ganz is missing; it was fired at by the fighters after the bomb dropping and left in the downward direction. Its further fate could not be observed because of severe attacks by fighters. Uffz Parr was wounded.”

**CRAFTIER COMBAT**

Although the report attempts to provide excuses, it is obvious that the Germans again were accorded a ‘warm welcome’ over Mlynów. A group of Soviet fighters, led by Captain Geibo, was already airborne and began to engage the bombers.

Geibo described the atmosphere of the battle: “After 13:00, another group of German bombers heading for Zdolbunov appeared within the field of view at an altitude of approximately 800m. Three of our flights and I took

off to intercept the enemy.

“As soon as we approached them I noticed two groups, with nine aircraft in each. In the right echelon the Junkers crews noticed us as well and assumed close formation at once, to be ready for defence. It is known that the closer is the formation, the closer (and thus, the more efficient) is the air gunners’ fire...

“I led the seven fighters to carry out an up-sun attack simultaneously, with our entire strength. I was figuring out how to do it in a craftier manner. We had to first disturb the formation of the Junkers, to disperse them, and then to shoot them down one by one. It meant that first and foremost we had to shoot down the leader. In the first morning battle, I had managed to do it. But what was going to happen in this one?

“I signalled to the fighters to begin attack simultaneously, all at once; each of them had to select the target for himself. Then I dashed at the lead aircraft. Soon I set the cross-hairs on it. I saw bursts of counter-fire. Then I pulled the trigger.

“The blazing trace of my fire went to the target. I expected the Junkers to be banking. However, it kept the course as if it were protected by some charm. The distance was rapidly decreasing; I had to break off!



"I made a steep and deep turn out to the left and got ready to engage again. But suddenly I felt a sharp pain in the thigh."

On the Soviet side, J/Lt I M Tsibulko shot down He 111P-2 1385 'G1+CT' of 9/KG 55, killing all five on board. Another aircraft of 9 Staffel, piloted by Lt Bermadinger, was damaged.

Negating the Germans' triumphant reports, the pilots of the 46th Fighter Regiment managed again to provide cover for their airfield and to prevent the enemy from bombing. We should, however, praise the composure of the German crews who were operating without escort.

Shooting down an He 111 and damaging another was achieved for the loss of Lt Tsibulko's I-16; he baled out and suffered burns. As noted above in his own words,

advantage of delivering a surprise strike, III/KG 55 and other units of the Luftwaffe's V Air Corps failed to destroy the Soviet air units at Mlynów. Nearly all the attacks were repelled by Soviet pilots, with considerable losses inflicted on the enemy.

The Gruppe lost five He 111s and another three were damaged; this was a third of the aircraft available on the morning on June 22. Three entire crews (15 men) were killed or reported missing in action and several men were wounded. That left just 15 crews for the following day.

For the sake of fairness, the German crews were operating under difficult conditions. Their targets were 60 to 75 miles from the frontier, and they had no fighter cover for about an hour over hostile territory. Reconnaissance inaccuracies and the tactically incompetent organisation of the first sortie led to considerable losses.

## RECKONING

At the end of the day, the 46th Fighter Regiment boasted five air victories over the He 111s; all of which were confirmed. One of these probably fell to J/Lt K K Kobyzev, the only pilot to have claimed two victories during the first air battles. He was awarded the highest decoration of the USSR, the Order of Lenin.

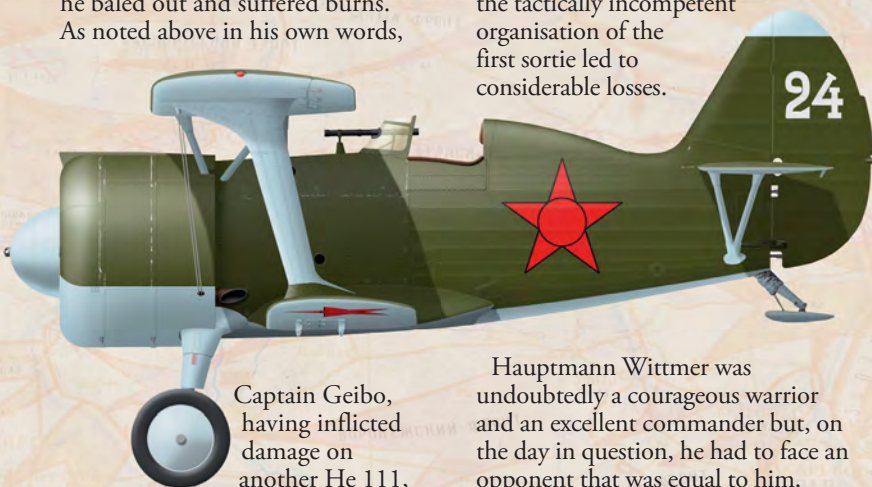
Of the Soviet losses from among 34 combat-worthy fighters, 11 aircraft – a third – were lost before evening fell. Of them, two I-16s and two I-153s were destroyed on the ground by bombs. Six were shot down during air-to-air combats and one was damaged and abandoned during the retreat. Four pilots were killed or reported missing in action; three were wounded.

The 46th was among the few Red Army Air Force units whose pilots not only provided reliable cover for their home airfield and sustained minimum casualties during bombing raids but also inflicted heavy losses on the enemy on June 22, 1941. That was due to the personal courage and heroism of such pilots as Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov, Ivan Mefodyevich Tsibulko, Konstantin Konstantinovich Kobyzev, and Simon Lavrovich Maksimenko, who were ready to hold off the enemy's attacks at the cost of their own lives.

The Commander of the 14th Combined Air Division Colonel I A Zykanov and the division headquarters provided guidance for aggressive combat from the first minutes of the war. Special mention should be made of the outstanding leadership abilities and personal courage of Joseph Ivanovich Geibo, who led his unit's fight and undoubtedly inspired the young pilots of the 46th. ●

**Left**  
Polikarpov I-15bis 'White 24' of the 46th Fighter Regiment, Mlynów, June 22, 1941. © A KAZAKOV 2017

**Below**  
Wreckage of an I-16 at Mlynów. ALL VIA AUTHOR



Captain Geibo, having inflicted damage on another He 111, was injured but with some difficulty landed his crippled aircraft back at base.

## RETREAT

At this point on June 21, 1941, military hostilities over Mlynów airfield and the cities of Dubno and Mlynów came to an end. So, what did the opponents achieve at the end of the first day of the war?

Although they had the theoretical

Hauptmann Wittmer was undoubtedly a courageous warrior and an excellent commander but, on the day in question, he had to face an opponent that was equal to him.

Nevertheless, Wittmer's perseverance paid off: at 19:30 Commander of the Southwestern Front Air Force, General Lt Ptukhin, authorised evacuation of the 46th Fighter Regiment from Mlynów to Garnovka. Riding down its Panzerschtrasse, the 11th Panzer Division rapidly broke through to Dubno and destroyed abandoned aircraft at the airfield.

