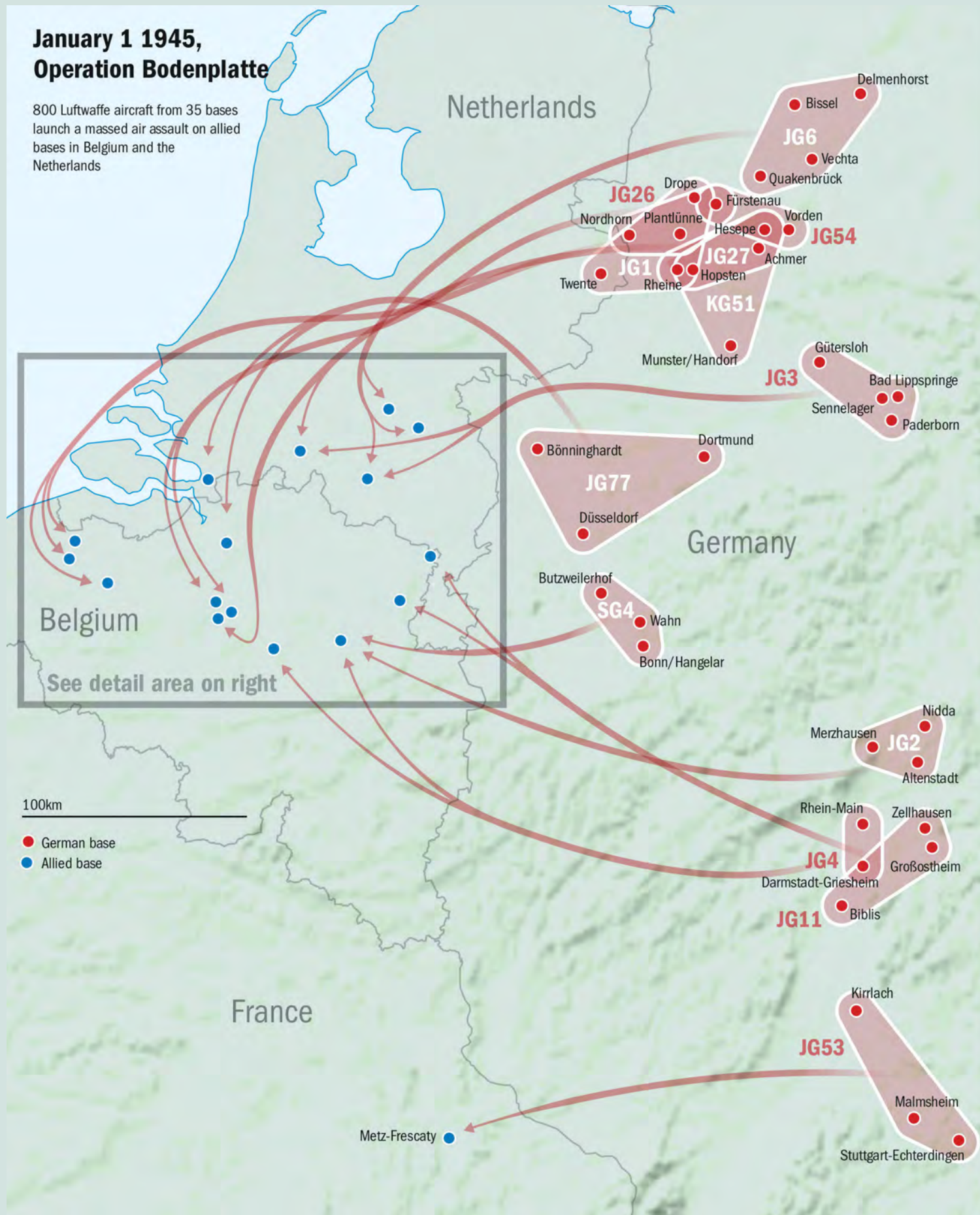
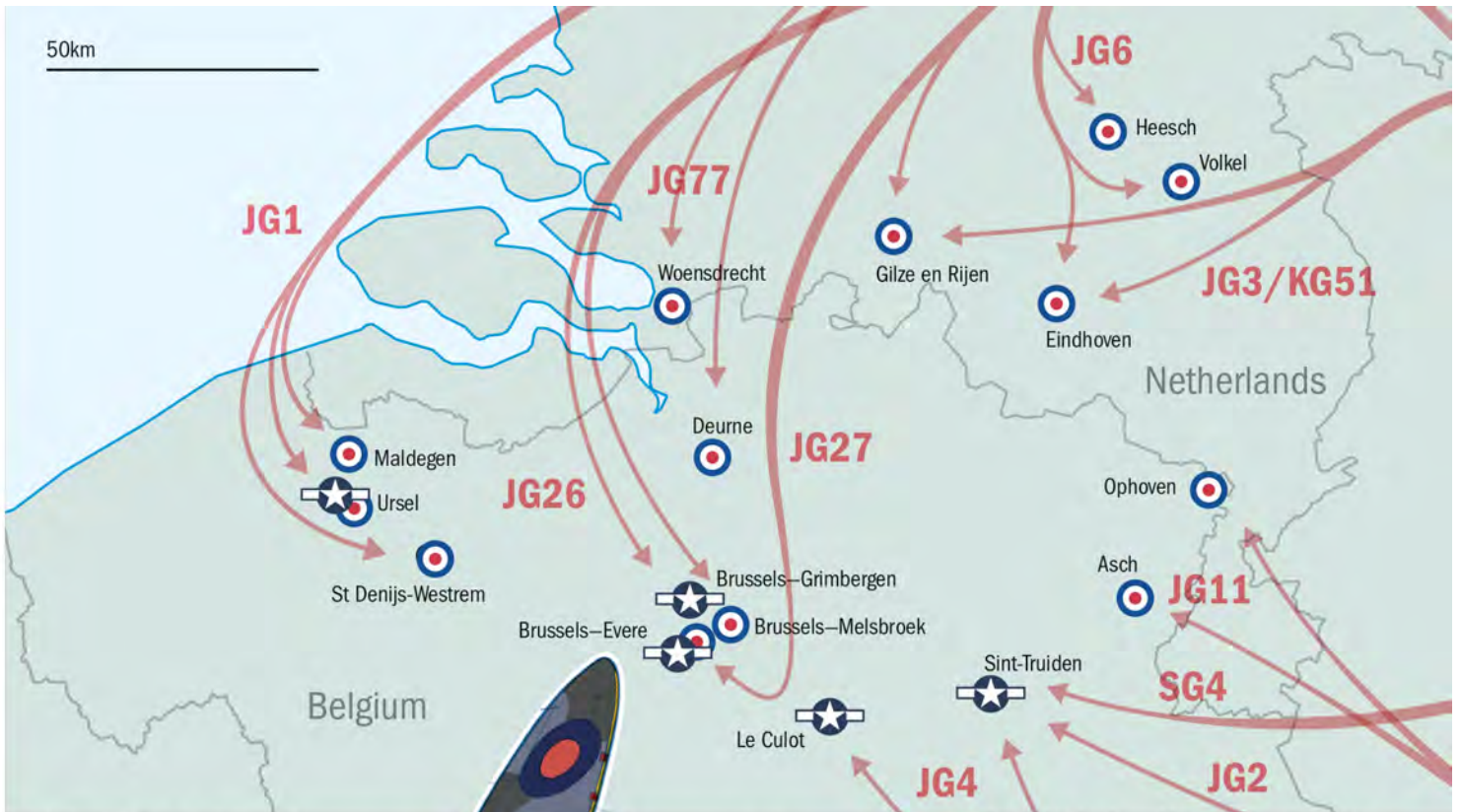


January 1 1945, Operation Bodenplatte

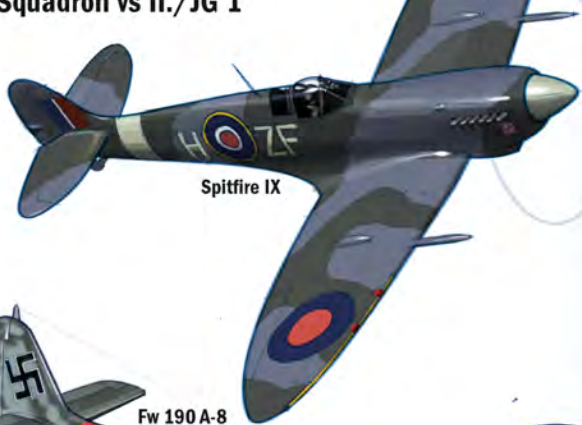
800 Luftwaffe aircraft from 35 bases launch a massed air assault on allied bases in Belgium and the Netherlands



50km



308 Squadron vs II./JG 1

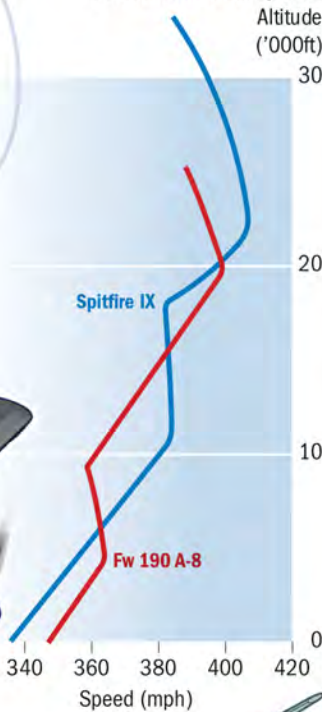


Spitfire IX



Fw 190 A-8

Performance Compared



Armament

Spitfire IX
Browning 0.303in
(x4)

Fw 190 A-8
13mm MG 131
(x2)

Hispano
20mm (x2)

MG 151
20mm (x2)

Key
● Cannon
● Machine gun

The Luftwaffe mustered a large force but losses were heavy

German aircraft taking part and lost by target

● Aircraft lost ● Total aircraft involved

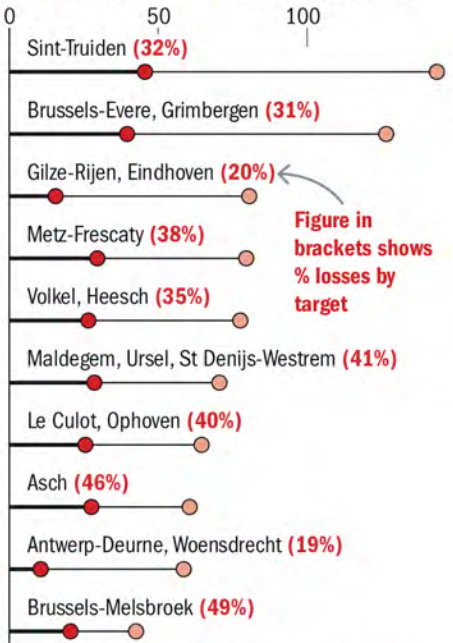


Figure in brackets shows % losses by target

Overall average Bodenplatte loss rate

38%

As a comparison RAF Bomber Command's costliest mission, Nuremberg Mar 30/31 1944, had a loss rate of

14%

Göring's Gamble

Michael E Haskew describes how Polish pilots of 308 Squadron fought to the death with the Luftwaffe during Germany's Operation Bodenplatte of January 1945.

FG OFF TADEUSZ SZLENKIER WITH GUNS BLAZING AS HE ENGAGES A GERMAN FW 190 IN HIS SPITFIRE LF.IX MK356/ZF-T. (ANTONIS KARIDIS)



As expected, the morning mission was routine. The Polish pilots of 308 Squadron had bombed the ferry crossing of the River Waal near the Dutch city of Brakel without much drama, and were on their way home.

The three squadrons of 131 Wing, the fighters of 302 (City of Poznań), 308 (City of Kraków), 317 (City of Wilno) were among numerous formations of the RAF constituted with expatriate Polish personnel, who had escaped from their country when it was overrun by the Nazis and Soviets in the opening days of the war in September 1939 and continued fighting in exile.

More than five long years later, the morning of January 1, 1945 had dawned cold, crisp and clear at 131 Wing's airfield at Sint-Denijs-Westrem, designated B-61 by the military, near the Belgian city of Ghent. Two weeks earlier, Adolf Hitler had unleashed his Ardennes Offensive, a last desperate gamble in the West against the allied forces surging toward the frontiers of the Third Reich, which came to be known popularly as the Battle of the Bulge.

Although bad weather worked to the Germans' advantage during the opening phase of the ground offensive, it hampered the supporting Luftwaffe air effort. ►



However, such circumstance was about to change.

While the RAF squadrons at Sint-Denijs completed their morning missions, more than 900 Luftwaffe fighters were roaring across the skies of France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Operation Bodenplatte, or Base Plate, postponed for two critical weeks, was finally unleashed. A crippling blow against allied air power – destroying as many RAF and US Army Air Force planes as possible on the ground and in the air while shooting up the installations at 16 of their airfields – might still

reinvigorate the stagnant ground phase of the Ardennes Offensive.

Resurgent Polish Airmen

The Polish-crewed 308 Squadron had been formed at RAF Squires Gate, Blackpool, in September 1940, and had flown countless sorties against the Germans in support of operations on the European continent. Since D-Day it had been relocating to airfields in France and then Belgium as British 21st Army Group, under Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, fought its way east and north on the ground, approaching the Nazi-occupied Netherlands.

All of the Polish pilots flew the Rolls-Royce Merlin 66 powered Supermarine Spitfire LF.IX. This was the fourth major variant of the famed fighter rapidly developed from mid-1941 in response to the appearance of the nimble and deadly Focke-Wulf Fw 190A fighter in the skies over Western Europe. Usually armed with pairs of wing-mounted 20mm cannon and four .303in machine guns, it was also capable of carrying 250 or 500lb bombs.

On the first day of 1945, the pilots of 308 Squadron, several shaking off the after-effects of New Year's Eve revelry, were joining their comrades in fighter-bomber strikes against targets in the Netherlands. The three flights of four 308 Spitfires began taking off from B-61 at 8.15am, Flt Lt Ignacy Olszewski leading Red Section, Fg Off Wacław Chojnacki commanding Blue Section, and Flt Lt Bronisław Mach leading White Section. Spitfires of 302 followed, ordered to attack a ferry crossing on the River Merwede, while two sections of 317 were to hit the rail line between Amersfoort and Zwolle.

The Storm Breaks

Many of the Luftwaffe pilots who took off to attack allied airfields on that fateful morning had little or no combat experience, as units in the west had suffered tremendous losses in the weeks prior to Operation Bodenplatte. To compound the difficulties, the attackers were facing German anti-aircraft batteries along the





flightpaths had not been warned that Bodenplatte was underway. The gunners had not seen Luftwaffe aircraft in such numbers for some time and assumed they were allied aircraft. As a result, a number of German planes were shot down or damaged by 'friendly fire'.

Then, in the confusion of their opening attacks, some Luftwaffe pilots were drawn away from their intended targets and made strafing runs at Sint-Denijs along with the Focke-Wulfs of the Luftwaffe's Gruppe II, Jagdgeschwader 1 (II./JG 1). Oberfähnrich Wilhelm Ade was one of those who became somewhat disorientated. He attacked the airfield at Maldegem initially. "At this stage we were still with about ten aircraft," Ade recalled in the exhaustively researched book *Bodenplatte: The Luftwaffe's Last Hope*, by authors John Manrho and Ron Pütz. "Everything was covered in smoke now and it was difficult to orientate. Strafing the airfield, I fired at the parked aircraft, achieved hits at some of them, and pulled up again. There was a considerable mix-up over the airfield and aircraft of I. Staffel and even of II. Gruppe mixed with my schwarm [flight]. It seems that we also flew over Sint-Denijs-Westrem! Suddenly, somebody broke the radio silence and shouted, 'Spitfires!'"

Unwelcome Visitors

Expecting to return to their beds after an uneventful mission, the 308 Squadron

pilots completed bombing and strafing runs and turned for home. At the same time, more than 30 Fw 190s of II./JG 1 were bearing down on Sint-Denijs. They hit the airfield from the north at 9.30Am, while the returning spitfires were still some distance away.

At first a few German pilots made strafing runs, shredding Spitfires and other aircraft on the ground. Within seconds, the Focke-Wulfs were swarming, their cannon and machine guns riddling buildings and vehicles while stunned ground crewmen sought cover. The Germans ravaged the airfield unimpeded by anti-aircraft fire as most of the guns had already been relocated to a new base at Grimbergen, Belgium.

For the returning Poles, the first indication that something was amiss occurred when Flt Lt Olszewski noticed blossoms of flak at a distance above a cluster of 20 ships in the Scheldt estuary. Seconds later, the first German fighters were spotted streaking across the sky at 4,000ft. Olszewski recalled: "Observing the ground, I suddenly noticed a dozen Fw ▶

LEFT: FG OFF WACLAW CHOJNACKI.

BELOW: GHENT, SHORTLY AFTER THE ATTACK.

OVERLEAF: PILOTS FROM 308 WITH A UNIT TROPHY – A FW 190 WING. (FROM L TO R) TADEUSZ SZLENKIER, STANISLAW BREYNER, JERZY GLÓWCZEWSKI, RYSZARD KANIOK, JÓZEF STANOWSKI AND ZBIGNIEW SOSZYŃSKI. (ALL IMAGES VIA WOJTEK MATUSIAK)



190s crossing our flight path flying from north to south.”

These Luftwaffe fighters were actually the trailing elements of I./JG 26 and III./JG 54 heading for an airfield near Brussels. Several 308 Squadron pilots bounced the Germans and claimed kills, among them Flt Lt Bronislaw Mach and Flt Sgt Zygmunt Soszynski with one each, while Sgt Stanislaw Breyner accounted for a pair of Fw 190s.

“Upon arriving in the Lokeren area, three Fw 190s were reported below and flying east by one of my pilots,” Olszewski recounted. “I saw a Spitfire being shot down by one enemy aircraft, and two of our Spitfires, pilots Flt Lt Mach and Sgt Soszynski, shooting down two enemy aircraft, which crashed on the ground. I then flew towards base, arriving there at 4,000ft and saw enemy aircraft attacking the airfield. I dived down and attacked one Fw 190 from dead astern. I fired a long burst

with cannon and machine guns from approximately 100 yards’ range. The enemy aircraft immediately turned on its back and crashed just east of Ghent.”

Breyner, who suffered a flying accident on February 11, was hospitalised, but died of his wounds a week later, actually may have startled his victims into their own death plunges: “I broke formation with my squadron and informed the leader...of that fact,” he reported. “...I dived after the two aircraft which were flying low and into the sun...I closed to about 100 yards before I recognised them as two Fw 190s. Their height was about 200ft. I was just about to fire when the two enemy aircraft apparently noticed me. They both pulled up very sharply, then rolled onto their backs and dived. One Fw 190 crashed into a building and the other into the ground before they could pull out of their dive.”

The two German pilots of JG 54, Hauptmann Willi Bottländer and Oberfeldwebel Walter Eckert, were killed



ABOVE: FLT LT TADEUSZ POWIERZA.

TOP RIGHT: SZLENKIER (SECOND LEFT) AND HIS SPITFIRE, MK356.

RIGHT: MEMBERS OF 131 WING INSPECTING AN ENGINE, PROBABLY FROM ONE OF THE FW 190S.

“ I dived down and attacked one Fw 190 from dead astern. I fired a long burst with cannon and machine guns from approximately 100 yards’ range”





on impact. Apparently, they had misjudged their altitude as morning haze lingered close to the ground.

More RAF 'Kills'

Flt Lt Mach opened fire on an Fw 190 piloted by Feldwebel Paul Drutschmann of JG 54, first from 200 yards and rapidly closing to half that distance. He saw strikes along the length of the German aircraft, heavily damaging the Focke-Wulf's starboard wing. Drutschmann pulled up abruptly and baled out at just enough altitude to ease his descent into the icy water of the River Durme. As he climbed out, shivering but uninjured, he was taken prisoner by Belgian civilians.

While this initial melee unfolded, the other pilots of 308 Squadron were alerted that their base was under attack. Flt Lt Chojnacki had encountered problems with his bomb release over the target and was the first pilot to reach the vicinity of Sint-Denijs, where several parked Spitfires were already flaming torches.

Chojnacki was alone and preparing to land. Just as he reached the field, he saw the German attack in progress and turned to meet several Fw 190s roaring in from the opposite direction. He immediately attacked an enemy fighter, shooting it down while the amazed ground crews watched. Another 308 pilot recalled the encounter: "...Chojnacki noticed these enemy aircraft and while still in the turn fired at the rearmost from about 800 yards. The enemy aircraft was hit and a large part of the tail flew off. The enemy pilot lost control and being low, below 200ft, and diving for the attack hit with its starboard wing a tree, then hit the top of a building on the airfield perimeter, finally coming to rest inside a Fortress (Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress) standing on the ground."

Chojnacki probably had shot down and killed Feldwebel Karl Hahn of 5./JG 1, but his own time was running out. Another 308 pilot last saw him turning to starboard with three Fw 190s on his tail. He was

shot down moments later, his body thrown from his Spitfire, which crashed near the town of Baarle, 3 miles (5km) northwest of Sint-Denijs.

After a fuel shortage had compelled Flt Sgt Jozef Stanowski to break formation, he spotted an Fw 190 making a strafing run: "I closed in on one Fw 190 and opened fire with all armament," he reported, "from approximately 60 degrees astern, at a range of 200 yards, and height of 1,200ft. The Fw 190 immediately caught fire and crashed in flames west of Ghent."

With one enemy fighter already to his credit, Stanowski encountered the wayward Fw 190 flown by Hauptmann Georg Hackbarth, acting commander of I./JG 1, which had been ordered to attack the airfield at Maldegem. The aggressive Polish pilot pressed his advantage. "I then turned back and attacked another Fw 190 flying east towards Ghent," remembered Stanowski. "I opened fire with all ▶



armament at approximately 100 yards range, from 15° astern, changing to dead astern. After the first burst, the enemy aircraft dropped its undercarriage. I fired another long burst and saw strikes on the cockpit and fuselage. The Fw 190 then dived into the town and crashed." Hackbarth, an ace who had claimed 16 aerial victories, most of them on the Eastern Front, careered through a flower shop owned by the Toebaert family and came to rest against nearby tram

rails. His corpse was retrieved from the adjacent street.

Within minutes, Stanowski was out of fuel and brought his Spitfire down in a field northeast of Ghent. "Jozef had landed his Spitfire on the other side of the city," remembered another Polish pilot, "swung his parachute over his shoulder and took the city tram to base. That same evening he got an enormous basket full of flowers, all that was salvaged from the florist's."

"I fired two long bursts with cannon and machine guns. After the second, the starboard wing of the enemy aircraft disintegrated and the Fw 190 rolled over on its back and crashed"

Fur Ball of Fire

The rest of the returning 308 pilots were shocked to find the air filled with enemy fighters and much of their base a smoking ruin. Nevertheless, they plunged into the fray. Fg Off Tadeusz Szlenkier quickly spotted a Spitfire under attack by a German Fw 190 and turned to intervene. "I started to dive down at this enemy aircraft," he remarked. "While I was closing in, the enemy levelled out. I opened fire from dead astern, at 800ft and 250 yards. I fired two



LEFT: SPITFIRE MJ467/ZF-K WAS FLOWN BY SGT STANISLAW BREYNER ON JANUARY 1, 1945.

OVERLEAF: A BLAZING GHENT AIRFIELD AFTER THE LUFTWAFFE ATTACK.

long bursts with cannon and machine guns. After the second, the starboard wing of the enemy aircraft disintegrated and the Fw 190 rolled over on its back and crashed. At this moment I felt strikes on my aircraft. I took evasive action to starboard. My engine gave trouble and I was forced to crash-land..."

Szlenkier later returned to the wreckage of his Spitfire IX MK346/ZF-T, and numerous photographs of the forlorn fighter were taken. His victim was tentatively identified as 20-year-old Unteroffizier Gerhard Behrens, who came down near a farm close to Rosdamstraat a short distance from the airfield.

Plt Off Andrzej Dromlewicz and Flt Sgt Jerzy Glowczewski also claimed aerial victories for 308 Squadron. Dromlewicz reported pouncing on an Fw 190 that was attacking a Spitfire, closing to 300 yards and blazing away with cannon and machine gun fire. When his cannon quit firing, the Polish pilot continued hammering with his machine guns, scoring hits on the fuselage and wing. The German pilot flipped the Fw 190 over and baled out.

Glowczewski swooped down from 3,000 to 200ft to shoot up a German aircraft from behind. The enemy pilot made a sharp turn to port and then jinked

to starboard, but could not shake the Spitfire, which closed to 100 yards. Glowczewski remembered an "explosion" in the Fw 190's cockpit, and the airplane rolled over on its back. Glowczewski could not watch, though, as a pair of Luftwaffe fighters forced him to take evasive action.

Airfield Defence

As the extent of the German assault was realised, the pilots of 302 Squadron were ordered to the defence of the airfield at Eindhoven, but they arrived too late to engage any enemy fighters and did not participate in the action above Sint-Denijs. Meanwhile, 317 reached Sint-Denijs as other pilots were locked in aerial combat, black smoke from wounded aircraft trailed earthward and an occasional parachute bloomed. The 'City of Wilno' pilots pitched into the raging air fight. Sgt Kazimierz Hubert shot down a red-nosed Fw 190 that crashed into a street in Ghent, while Sqn Ldr Marian Chelmecki, W/O Zenobiusz Wdowczynski, and Fg Off Czeslaw Mroczyk were among eight other 317 pilots who also claimed kills. However, Flt Lt Tadeusz Powierza suffered a serious head injury when his Spitfire was shot down by a pilot of II./JG 1 and died shortly afterward.

The air battle over Sint-Denijs lasted roughly half an hour. By 10am, the surviving Fw 190s of II./JG 1 had departed and the Spitfires of 131 Wing were landing, several of them with only minutes of fuel left in their tanks. At least seven Spitfire pilots were forced to belly-land or glide down in fields after running out of petrol.

Two 131 Wing Spitfires had been shot down and their valiant pilots, Chojnacki and Powierza, killed. ▶



Airmen of 308

Pilots from 308 Squadron with one of their Spitfires at Grimbergen in early 1945. Left to right, on the ground: Fg Off Kazimierz Kozak, W/O Stanislaw Bednarczyk*, Flt Lt Kazimierz Dolicher, Sqn Ldr Karol Pniak, Fg Off Antoni Lipkowski (crouching in front), Flt Lt Ignacy Olszewski*, Plt Off Wacław Stański, Flt Lt Bronisław Mach*, Sgt Bogusław Kasprowiak, W/O Józef Sawoszczyk. On the aeroplane, left to right: Fg Off Włodzimierz Link, F/O Eugeniusz Haerberle, Fg Off Tadeusz Szlenkier*, Plt Off Andrzej Dromlewicz*, Sgt Jerzy Glowczewski* (on the propeller), Sgt Bogdan Strobel, Plt Off Salwomir Kowalski, W/O Zygmunt Soszyński*.

*denotes participants of the mission on January 1, 1945.

Replacement Spitfire

A panorama of Grimbergen, 131 Wing's next airfield, later during January 1945. The first two Spitfires in the line-up are MJ342/ZF-O and MJ396/ZF-U, flown with success on January 1, 1945 by Flt Lt Ignacy Olszewski and Sgt Jerzy Głowczewski, respectively. Notably, the ZF-R further up is a replacement for MK984. It is ML407, which survives to date, well known as the 'Grace Spitfire'.

The absence of Sky fuselage bands and propeller spinners on the Spitfires, and the presence of a dug-in AA gun position are both direct results of 'Bodenplatte'.



Eighteen Spitfires, a Short Stirling and a B-17 had been destroyed on the ground. Five Spitfires were damaged. The airfield was thoroughly shot up, buildings belching smoke and vehicles and equipment smashed. Three ground personnel were killed and 21 wounded.

Luftwaffe All But Done

Although the JG 1 attack on Sint-Denijs and nearby fields had resulted in the destruction of dozens of allied aircraft, the German losses were irreplaceable. Of the 70 JG 1 planes involved in

Bodenplatte, 29 were shot down and four more damaged.

Twenty-five Luftwaffe pilots were killed, one wounded and seven captured. Approximately 36 Fw 190s attacked Sint-Denijs, and 17 were lost.

When the skies were finally empty, the Nazi air offensive had destroyed an estimated 305 allied planes and damaged 190. These losses were extensive, but allied industrial capacity could easily make them good. The Luftwaffe, meanwhile, lost 280 aircraft with more than 200 airmen killed, wounded or captured.

Rather than striking a debilitating blow against allied air power in Europe, Operation Bodenplatte had only hastened the death knell of the Luftwaffe. The intrepid pilots of 308 Squadron and 131 Wing had contributed significantly to the demise of a determined enemy. Within days, Hitler's Ardennes Offensive had been thwarted and soon the war in Europe was over. ●

BELOW: SZLENKIER INSPECTING ONE OF HIS GERMAN VICTIMS.

