

THE AXIS AIR FORCES

FLYING IN SUPPORT OF
THE GERMAN LUFTWAFFE

FRANK JOSEPH

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INTRODUCTION: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

The Luftwaffe fights today on many fronts—from the Arctic Circle to the Bay of Biscay and the North African desert; from far out over the Atlantic Ocean to the Volga. But we are not alone. The skies are illuminated by the different national colors of other peoples who share our epic struggle for the common defense of European civilization.

—Hermann Goering, February 2, 1943¹

Although countless books and magazine articles describe virtually every aspect of German air power in World War II, their millions of readers are mostly unaware that the Luftwaffe fought in concert with a broad variety of foreign air forces across Europe and Asia. Benito Mussolini's partnership with the Third Reich is well known, but his Regia Aeronautica is usually dismissed as having been too weak and ineffectual for interest. So too, Japan's contribution to the Axis is popularly understood, although beyond common familiarity with the carrier-based attack on Pearl Harbor; and the *Zero* fighter plane's enduring reputation, little is known, even to serious students of the Pacific War, about the Imperial Japanese Army or Naval Air Forces.

A general lack of appreciation for their significance stems from the pitifully few books devoted to the air arms of either Fascist Italy or Imperial Japan. Far fewer books even go so far as to mention the contemporaneous air forces of Spain, Vichy France, or Hungary, to say nothing

of Slovakia, Thailand, and Manchuria. Nor were the air forces operated by these and other Axis nations the miniscule, insignificant military services readers may assume. Close examination of their histories uncovers a hitherto undisclosed, unsuspected panorama of World War II that throws a whole new light on the conflict.

We learn, for example, that the Romanians developed and flew their own interceptor, which capably defended the vital Ploiești oil fields against Anglo-American heavy-bombers. Finnish pilots, invariably outnumbered in the air by their Soviet opponents, ranked among the highest-scoring aces of all time. Far from having been saddled with an obsolete air force, the Italians made the world's first cross-country jet flight in 1941, and their Macchi *Greyhounds* and *Centaur*s bested both British *Spitfires* and U.S. *Mustangs*.

Contrary to Allied wartime portrayals, not every nation fighting at the side of the Third Reich was headed by a Nazi regime, nor even sympathetic to National Socialism. Croatia, Italy, and Slovakia had Fascist or Fascist-style states aligned with Germany. Hungary went Fascist in late 1944, but had been preceded for most of the war by the regency of an arch-conservative anti-Fascist, Miklós Horthy. Monarchies reigned over Bulgaria, Romania, Manchuria, and Japan, while an authoritarian republic ruled Thailand. The parliamentarians of Finland's constitutional democracy wanted as little to do with Adolf Hitler as possible, and rejected his plea to advance their armed forces beyond reclaimed Finnish soil previously annexed by the Soviets, thereby losing the Battle of Leningrad for both Germany and Finland. Rightist governments in France and Spain under Philippe Pétain and Francisco Franco, respectively, allowed volunteers to join the Wehrmacht, but refrained from formally allying themselves with the Axis.

These and many thousands of volunteers from the occupied and neutral countries made up the German Luftwaffe's foreign comrades-in-arms. Not all shared the same dream. Idealists saw Operation *Barbarossa*—the code name for Adolf Hitler's June 22, 1941, invasion of Russia—as the most historically significant, unique opportunity for defending all Europeans from otherwise certain destruction and slavery, a struggle that would make possible a new Golden Age of racial unity and cultural greatness. Blinkered nationalists cared not a fig for their fellow Europeans but fought on the Eastern Front entirely for their own particular lands, and were absolutely blind to the necessity of continental cooperation. Others regarded the conflict only as a means to regain lost territories and/or obtaining new ones. Conquest in the East

would simultaneously eliminate Stalin and create *Lebensraum* (“living space”) for continental over-population, while providing Europe’s new breadbasket.

For all their disparate motivations and agendas, what these strange bedfellows shared in common was the will to extirpate the Soviet colossus growing ever more powerfully next door. Some had first-hand experience with Communism in practice, when Bela Kuhn seized power in post-World War I Hungary, or Lenin sparked a bloody civil war throughout Finland during the 1920s, followed the next decade by another civil war that tore Spain in half. Since then, the Red Army had mushroomed into the largest military phenomenon on Earth, and was universally perceived as a common threat to every European people. Tens of thousands of them—from Iberia to the Balkans—had already died in Soviet-sponsored upheavals long before Operation *Barbarossa* was launched.

Like the Regia Aeronautica, most Axis air forces operated independently from, but in concert with, the Luftwaffe, although all of them were more or less indebted to Germany for training and, at least partially, leadership and equipment. The distant Manchurians flew Junkers-86 medium-bombers, and the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force’s Kawasaki *Tony* interceptor began as a Heinkel-100. Particularly surprising were the numerous crucial roles undertaken by the crews of these relatively obscure air forces during the war, and how that global struggle sometimes hinged on their performance.

To be sure, influence on the development and even the outcome of World War II was all out of proportion to their low numbers and outdated aircraft. Operating cast-off Brewster *Buffalo* fighters, sometimes against 12-to-1 opposition in the skies over Leningrad, Finland’s Eino Juutilainen claimed 94 confirmed “kills,” though his actual score was well over 100. Even little Slovakia produced world-class aces, such as Ján Režňák, who downed 32 enemy aircraft and destroyed dozens more on the ground.

Meanwhile, Hungary’s Laszlo Molnar and Bulgaria’s Petar Botchev accounted between themselves for literally thousands of Red Army troops, armored vehicles, and supply trucks. Their victories are no less unacknowledged than those scored by France’s Vichy Air Force, which turned back an Allied invasion of West Africa and effectively defended Madagascar against overwhelming odds for half a year. Estonians, Latvians, and even anti-Communist Russians operated their own squadrons on the Eastern Front, where they regularly spoiled Soviet initiatives.

During the struggle for Stalingrad, Croatian pilots averaged more than 20 missions per day, until they were the last Axis pilots still flying over the embattled city. While Manchurian airmen rammed their planes into some of the first American B-29s lost during World War II, Japanese interceptors defeated America's early strategic bombing offensive against their country, and USAAF P-38 *Lightnings* fell under the guns of Thai pilots.

In addition to those nations operating their own air forces on behalf of the Axis, volunteers from every land occupied by the Wehrmacht, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan—and beyond—joined their respective services, as individuals or in groups. Most did not become aircrews but served throughout military hierarchies according to their ages and abilities. For example, 1,112 Lithuanian youngsters participated in the Luftwaffe as helpers in flak, searchlight, and transport formations.² Although Estonian and Latvian air force units freely and fully cooperated with the Germans, as Chapter 6 describes, Lithuanian authorities refused direct cooperation with the Axis, unless their nation's independence was first recognized. Their fellow Balts failed to convince them that political discussions had been rendered premature by the exigencies of war, and could not be properly entertained until after the Soviets had been completely defeated.

Despite the adamant insistence of their leaders, numerous Lithuanians volunteered for duty in various *Waffen-SS* divisions—mostly *Allgemeine*, *Volksdeutsche*, Estonian, or Latvian. Fewer served in the Luftwaffe, and not always on the Eastern Front. Among the aircraft collected for early 1944's Operation *Steinbock* ("Capricorn")—the planned disruption of Anglo-American materiel stockpiling in Britain preparatory to the Normandy Invasion—several Junkers Ju.88 medium-bombers were manned by Lithuanian crews with German flight officers. They were joined by Belgian volunteers, such as Joseph Christian, a radio operator-rear-dorsal gunner with *Kampfgeschwader* 54, the famous *Totenkopf* ("Death's Head") squadron, which participated on every front wherever the Wehrmacht was engaged. On April 18, Christian was aboard a Ju.88 over the London docks, which it had successfully attacked, when his Junkers was set upon by several *Spitfires* and destroyed with the loss of all hands.

Steinbock's 447 inadequately escorted bombers were intercepted by more than 500 radar-guided RAF fighters, which claimed 329 "kills" over the course of the five-month-long Operation. From late February to early March, Christian's *Totenkopf* squadron alone lost 18 warplanes.

The British had been additionally and vitally assisted by their complete mastery of all Luftwaffe codes, which warned them prior to each attack of the number and type of enemy aircraft, their target destination, estimated time of arrival, speed, and altitude—even squadron identification, including the individual names of enemy commanders. Given such advance notice, together with their numerical superiority, the British could have hardly missed.

A former pilot of Belgium's disbanded *Militair Vliegwezen*, Alfons Labeau, became a Luftwaffe color sergeant (*Oberscharführer*) in June 1944. Thereafter, he flew mostly transport and liaison aircraft for the duration. His compatriot, Guido Rombart, was a *Waffen-SS-Langemarck* veteran, who transferred to the Luftwaffe in 1943. After completing his flight instruction at Nenndorf and Gumpersdorf, then posting with a fighter training unit, JG 102, in early April, he was transferred to fully operational interceptors with *Jagdgeschwader 1 Oesau* the early following autumn. His mount was a Focke-Wulf FW-190 A-8, arguably the best all-around piston-driven fighter plane of World War II. The *Würger's* BMW 801 D-2 radial engine, rated at 2,000 hp, enabled it to climb 2,560 feet per minute and turn inside the Allies' top competitors. Living up to its name, the "Butcher-Bird" was armed with two, 13-mm MG 131 machine-guns and four 20-mm MG 151.20 E cannons.

On September 27, Rombart and 55 other pilots of I./JG 1 and II./JG 1 were ordered to intercept more than 300 B-17 *Flying Fortresses* escorted by 262 P-47 *Thunderbolts* of the USAAF 63rd Fighter Squadron raiding the German city of Emden. During the melee that ensued, the Belgian airman's Focke-Wulf crashed into the sea near the island of Borkum. His body was never recovered.

Like the Lithuanian flak helpers, 2,000 volunteers served in the *Flae-mische Flakbrigade* as gunnery personnel and munition handlers from early 1944 until the Allied occupation of Belgium. A similar unit was *Flak-Regiment 159*, where Belgians such as Joseph Justin, a 20-year-old laboratory assistant from Malmedy and former gunner aboard a Junkers Ju.88 medium-bomber with 9./KG 6, was assigned in December that same year.

A Danish Ju.88 pilot was A. T. Harild, who rose to the rank of Luftwaffe major while fighting in the skies above Orel, in 1943. Denmark's aces in the Luftwaffe included Lieutenant Peter Horn and Captain Poul Sommer. Both were Iron Cross recipients—second and first class—for their 11 and 6 aerial victories, respectively. Sommer returned from front-line service in Italy to his homeland, where he formed the *Vagtkorpset*



Arguably the finest piston-driven fighter of World War II, the Luftwaffe's "Butcher-Bird" was also flown by Danish and Belgian pilots against Anglo-American forces in the West. (U.S. Air Force)

de Tyske Luftvaaben ("Guard Corps of the German Luftwaffe"), comprising 1,200 personnel in five companies to improve airfield security, particularly against resistance movement saboteurs. So successful were his organizational efforts in this direction, Heinrich Himmler personally promoted Sommer to the rank of reserve *SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer* on January 11, 1945.

Norwegians served in *Kampfgeschwader* 30, the "Eagle Squadron" of dive-bombers renowned for their devastating attacks on Anglo-American Arctic convoys to Russia. A veteran navigator, Harald Hougen, later became an instructor for pilots of the Luftwaffe's most unconventional weapon. The so-called *Beethoven-Gerät* ("Beethoven Apparatus") was a specially modified Ju.88—its cockpit filled with a 3,960-pound explosive charge—surmounted by a conventional Messerschmitt-109 or Focke-Wulf-190, whose pilot controlled both in flight. On the approach to target, the fighter pilot activated a gyro aboard the unmanned Junkers, immediately thereafter disengaged to travel on a straight course to its objective. The former bomber's extended conical warhead was lined

with copper or aluminum, modeled after anti-armor rounds to penetrate 21 feet of reinforced concrete.

Various combinations of the *Mistel*, or “Misteltoe,” as it was also known, resulted in about 250 examples, their most notable success being an attack against the floating headquarters of the British 231st Infantry Brigade operating along the beaches of Courseulles, near Arromanches, during the Normandy Invasion. On June 24, 1944, a *Mistel* narrowly missed but exploded near HMS *Nith*, killing 9 crew members aboard and wounding 26. According to the Royal Navy Association’s website, “the starboard side amidships was blown in and steel fragments raked the whole breadth of the ship. Steam pipes in the boiler room were burst, and the main generator was put out of action.” The frigate survived but was severely disabled and towed away for repairs. While Hougen never himself flew a *Beethoven-Gerät* in combat, he did train Horst Rudat, the *Hauptmann* who successfully attacked HMS *Nith*.³

A flying Dutchman with the Luftwaffe was Dr. Jan de Vliegheer, killed in action on February 20, 1944, while piloting his Messerschmitt Bf.109 *Gustav* against USAAF heavy-bombers over northern Germany. His compatriot, Klaas Visser, died under similar circumstances the following December 12.

Holland’s most untypical volunteer was Wilhelm Eduard de Graaf, a pre-war airline pilot for KLM. Born in Java to a Dutch father and a native Indonesian mother, his mixed parentage was no obstacle to de Graaf’s acceptance and promotion by German authorities, because they valued his exceptional flying skills. He was admitted to the *Versuchverband Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe*, a highly classified formation for testing secret aircraft. He thereafter transferred to another extraordinary squadron, *Kampfgeschwader 200*, specializing in extremely hazardous missions, such as 1944’s Operation *Maria*, when agents were flown far behind enemy lines to be set down inside Soviet Russia.

Perhaps most surprising of all, several USAAF personnel, mostly prisoners-of-war, volunteered to fight for Germany during World War II, but 2nd Lieutenant Martin James Monti was the only American to actually defect with an aircraft. Hundreds of other Allied aircrews went AWOL during the European conflict by fleeing to neutral countries, such as Portugal, Turkey, or Sweden. In Switzerland alone, 186 *Liberator* and *Flying Fortress* heavy-bombers, together with additional numbers of other USAAF warplanes, sought refuge. By contrast, just a single Italian fighter pilot fled to Switzerland.⁴ But on October 29, 1943—the 21st anniversary of Mussolini’s ascent to power—Monti flew

a Lockheed *Lightning* from the 354th Air Service Squadron, stationed at Pomigliano Airfield, north of Naples, to Milan, capital of the Duce's new Fascist state, the Italian Social Republic. He tended both his warplane and personal services to the "Axis war against Communist Russia."⁵ But German authorities took more interest in the F-5A, an up-graded reconnaissance version of the P-38G, in which Monti arrived, sending it to Germany's Rechlin test center for evaluation.

When his application to join the Luftwaffe was turned down, he enlisted in the **SS** *Standarte Kurt Eggers*, a propaganda arm of the *Waffen-SS* in Berlin, rising to the rank of *Untersturmführer*, as a propagandist. A fellow American in the same unit was Louisiana-born Peter Delaney, an *SS-Hauptsturmführer*, who later enlisted in the *Légion des Volontaires Français*—composed of **SS** volunteers from France—because he spoke fluent French. Another U.S. comrade was New Yorker Roy Rickmers, awarded the Knight's Cross on March 26, 1943, for outstanding heroism while serving with the 320. *Infanterie-Division*, which had been cut off at Liman, southeast of Kharkov, by a Soviet advance; Rickmers was the only American to receive this high Wehrmacht award. German documents show that five U.S. citizens were enlisted in the *Waffen-SS* by May 1940, and at least eight more fell in action by war's end, although the total number of American volunteers has never been ascertained.

During April 1945, Martin Monti was still wearing his **SS** uniform when arrested in northern Italy by Communist partisans. They turned him over to American military authorities, who thereafter sentenced their former 2nd Lieutenant to 15 years imprisonment for desertion but granted him a pardon several months later on the condition that he join the U.S. Army. Following promotion to sergeant, he was arrested again, condemned this time to 25 years incarceration on charges of treason but paroled in 1960. He died 40 later in his Missouri home.

Another USAAF officer—an unidentified Major and former POW—was known to have participated in the *Deutsche Volkssturm Wehrmacht* (the German People's National Militia) during the final defense of Berlin, where he was reported missing in action shortly before the capital fell. Dr. Josef Goebbels was diligent in destroying all records of individuals who volunteered from the United States or England to protect them from personal postwar consequences. According to the British Fascist John Amery, who broadcast for the Third Reich throughout the war, "Three Royal Air Force airplanes have come over to us so far with their arms and equipment."⁶ But none of the English POWs—some from the

RAF—who joined the Germans, served in the Luftwaffe; all enlisted in the British Free Corps of the *Waffen-SS* to fight invading Soviets near the west bank of the Oder River, in January 1945.

Under successive Prime Ministers Georgios Tsolakoglou, Konstantinos Logothetopoulos, and Ioannis Rallis, some 4,000 volunteers participated as ground personnel, auxiliaries, flak helpers, enemy aircraft observers, meteorologists, and maintenance crews with *Regia Aeronautica* squadrons stationed in Greece from May 1941 to September 1943, when Italian forces withdrew from the Peloponnesus. Their place was immediately taken by Luftwaffe units until October 1944, although many Eastern Mediterranean islands, such as Crete, Rhodes, and Leros, were occupied by the Germans until May and even June the following year.

Volunteers from these off-shore locations and the mainland were at first drawn in large measure from the ranks of the numerous Fascist organizations that proliferated throughout pre-war Greece, such as the *Ethniki Enosis Ellados* (the National Union of Greece), the *Ethnikon Kyriarchon Kratos* (Greek Liberation Party), the ESPO (Hellenic Socialist Patriotic Organization), *Sidira Eirini* (Iron Peace), and *Elliniko Ethnikosocialistiko Komma* (the Greek National Socialist Party).

By late 1943, economic hardships imposed by the British blockade fueled resentment throughout Greece, resulting in greater numbers of both resistance fighters against the German occupation, and others, hating the Western Allies, more willing to assist the Wehrmacht.

Although Sweden upheld its neutrality throughout World War II, an unknown number of *Flygvapnet* personnel flew as foreign observers aboard Luftwaffe aircraft during operations on the Eastern Front, beginning in late summer 1941. At least one unconfirmed report held that a 1st Lieutenant in the Swedish Air Force, while invited to pilot a Messerschmitt Bf-109F, shot down a Yak fighter during the siege of Leningrad. Particularly after Red Army warplanes repeatedly bombed Strängnäs and other towns in southeastern Sweden, growing numbers of *Flygvapnet* officers and many others throughout the country urged retaliation and even the formation of an all-volunteer Swedish adjunct to the Luftwaffe, a proposal that Hermann Goering naturally welcomed, but Stockholm's nervous government authorities emphatically rejected.

Portugal was less a neutral country than a *de facto* co-belligerent, dispatching vital supplies, such as tungsten, to the Third Reich. Portugal's air force was equipped primarily with Axis aircraft, such as 10

Breda Ba.65 fighter-bombers received from Italy. Although a disadvantageous geographic position prevented the nation's quasi-Fascist Prime Minister, António de Oliveira Salazar, from joining the Axis, he nonetheless sent regular delegations of military advisors on "inspection tours" of the Wehrmacht in Russia, where they occasionally accompanied German flight crews during sorties in the Kuban region. Here too, rumors still echo of guest Portuguese airmen covertly downing a Soviet warplane or two.

More certainly, all those peoples who actively fought at the Luftwaffe's side form part of World War II's forgotten history, the outcome of which was more dependent on their participation, as the following chapters demonstrate, than most of its students realize or appreciate.

PART I

WESTERN EUROPE

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Chapter 1

FLYING FASCES

Every airman is a born Fascist.

—Guido Mattioli, in *Mussolini Aviatore*¹

As possibilities for war loomed ever larger during the late 1930s, Benito Mussolini was increasingly haunted by the presence of Britain's oil refineries in the Near East. They fueled her Mediterranean fleet, which potentially severed his colonies from the outside world, sealed off the peninsula itself, and even threatened southern Europe with attack and invasion. A mockery would be made of Italians' claim on the Middle Sea as *mare nostro*, "our sea." Crippling the big Persian Gulf petroleum complex at far-off Manama, on the northeast coast of Bahrain, in the distant Persian Gulf was therefore a top priority that could strand Royal Navy warships in Alexandria, their Egyptian anchorage.

An unconventional, if suicidal (i.e., one-way) air strike of some kind might be able to damage the faraway Bahrain facilities. But four months after opening hostilities against the Western Allies on June 10, 1940, Mussolini's campaigns in Libya and Sudan required all available warplanes, leaving none for the proposed operation against Manama. Only with stabilization of the desert front in early fall, a few bombers from the 41st *Gruppo* could be temporarily spared, and even these long-range aircraft lacked a sufficient radius of action to strike enemy positions at such a prodigious distance. The proposed target's remote location was,

in fact, its greatest defense, rendering the refineries effectively isolated from all known forms of attack.

Seizing the 41st *Gruppo's* limited offer, Lieutenant-Colonel Ettore Muti had its four warplanes stripped of their armor and guns, installed extra fuel tanks, and cut the number of their flight crews in half, to just two men—a pilot and navigator-bombardier—per aircraft. Only this bare-bones modification of Savoia-Marchetti's SM.82, a transport known as the *Canguru* ("Kangaroo") for its capacious hold, alone had a chance of undertaking such a bold operation. Cabin volume was so great it could easily accommodate an entire disassembled Fiat fighter plane, with room to spare. This remarkable spaciousness, combined with the aircraft's impressive lifting capacity (thanks to its 1,276.64 square feet of wing area), suggested transformation into the heavy-bomber role. Three 950-hp Alfa Romeo 128 RC.21, nine-cylinder radial engines, however, meant the *Canguru* was already underpowered. Strangely enough, it could still reach a respectable top speed of 230 mph, even after the addition of extra fuel tanks and provision for explosive payloads.

These were the defenseless flying gas-bombs Muti flew from Rome-Ciapino to Gadur, in the Eastern Mediterranean, during early fall 1940. There, he and his comrades made final preparations for their historic mission. On October 18, the Italian *Kangaroos* did not exactly bounce into the early morning skies over the island of Rhodes. The quartet of airplanes, dangerously overloaded with additional petrol, plus one-and-a-half tons of incendiaries and high explosives apiece, struggled painfully for altitude. After gradually reaching 19,024 feet, they proceeded on an easterly heading over Cyprus, Lebanon, and Syria, then headed southeast past Jordan and Iraq into the Persian Gulf.

Their complex navigation was made all the more difficult because Muti insisted that no radio contact be made either between themselves in the air or with headquarters back as base for fear of alerting British air defenses located along their route. The airmen were led by a single SM.82 assigned to guide them toward the target. Directional spotlights illuminated a large white rhombus emblazoned on the upper surfaces of either wing, allowing pilots of the other planes to keep their pathfinder in sight after dark. In fact, they arrived over the target in the dead of night, at 02:25 hours, but were immensely aided by the refineries themselves, which were bathed in batteries of brilliant lights. To the stupefying amazement of everyone on the ground, the lumbering trimotors roared in at only a few hundred feet, dropping their combined 26,500

pounds of high explosives on half a dozen oil wells and several fuel storage tanks. Manama erupted into a rising sea of flames and billowing black smoke.

Just before the raid, one Savoia-Marchetti pilot lost sight of the pathfinder but was able to drop another 4,410 pounds of bombs on rigs and machinery garishly illuminated by the enemy refinery's blazing conflagration. Encountering no defensive fire, all four *Cangurus* swung away from the demolished target in perfect order, then made a beeline for Italian-held Eritrea. After flying 1,450 miles in 15 hours, 30 minutes, the formation touched down at Zulu airfield in the early morning of October 19. The mission's complete success was additionally a feat of navigation unprecedented for its time, testifying to the great skill and iron nerves of its flight crews.

The local material damage they inflicted had been dramatic, even serious, but was far outstripped by collateral repercussions. The facility was knocked out for more than two months, depriving British land forces of crucial oil supplies already in short supply. Production was unable to resume at Manama until shortly before Christmas, although the attack did produce more lasting consequences in the RAF decision to recall an entire *Spitfire* squadron for defense of the refineries at a time when such aircraft were understrength and desperately needed by British Army General Archibald Percival Wavell trying to mount his own offensive against the Italians in North Africa. Removing these warplanes to the Persian Gulf just then was a real help to Regia Aeronautica pilots, whose Fiat biplane fighters were dangerously outnumbered and outclassed by their opponents.

At the time of Muti's brazen sortie at Manama, he had already become the world's foremost proponent of long-distance precision bombing. Due to his singular efforts, Italy got off the first shots after her declaration of war on the Western Allies, when he led a series of raids against the British Mandate in Palestine, blasting Tel Aviv, Acre, Jaffa and a number of other petroleum-rich towns. An eyewitness for *Time* magazine who described one of the attacks a week before his report appeared in the July 29, 1940, issue told how "Ten, big, Italian bombers, flying at great altitude from the Dodecanese Islands, giving the British bases at Cyprus a wide berth, dumped fifty bombs on the Haifa oil terminal and refinery."² The resulting fires raged out of control for days thereafter. RAF Hawker Mk I *Hurricane* fighters based at Mount Carmel failed to intercept the Italians, whose hit-and-run tactics additionally caught anti-aircraft gunners by surprise.

These repeated operations over Palestine were carried out with impunity because the defenders, as yet unequipped with radar and aided by Bletchley Park cryptographers, who would later break all Axis codes, never knew from which direction or when Muti was coming. His relentless concentration on enemy oil dumps and factories temporarily crippled British sea power in the Aegean, immobilizing the Royal Navy's base at Alexandria. As an immediate consequence, Mussolini's convoys loaded with troops and supplies sailed unhindered across the Central Mediterranean Sea from Italian ports to Sidi Barrani, in Libya, where the North African Campaign was ignited.

In early July 1943, Muti became a high-ranking officer in military intelligence, where he uncovered evidence extremely damaging to the former Supreme Chief of the Italian General Staff, Pietro Badoglio. The highly classified records revealed that "by the late months of 1917 (mostly thanks to his Masonic contacts, including his superior, General Capello)," Badoglio "was named as Vice Chief-of-Staff (*Sottocapo di Stato Maggiore*), despite being one of the main leaders responsible for the disaster during the Battle of Caporetto on 24 October 1917," when 11,000 Italian troops were killed, plus 20,000 wounded after 25 days of senseless combat. "In the years after World War One, in which he held several high ranks in the Italian Army, Badoglio exerted a constant effort in modifying official documents in order to hide his role in the defeat."³

With Italy in a critical phase of the war, Muti knew that a scandal in the armed forces would have a calamitous impact on morale at the worst possible moment and decided to postpone the release of his findings until a more appropriate time. But he waited too long. A few weeks later, Badoglio became head of the opposition that deposed Mussolini, then had Muti assassinated on August 24 before the airman could make his revelations publicly known. The famous Ettore Muti was instantly lauded as a martyr of Fascism's new Italian Social Republic in the north, where his image emblazoned thousands of recruitment posters, and his name was bestowed on Ravenna's XXIX *Brigata Nera*, one of the paramilitary "Black Brigades" organized, staffed, and soldiered by the Duce's most die-hard followers.

Just one month before Muti's spectacular bombing runs over Palestine and immediately prior to Italy's declaration of war, Mussolini had been assured by Francesco Pricolo that he had at his disposal 3,296 warplanes.⁴ But this figure was misleading. The duplicitous Major General of Aviation failed to mention that out of his numerically impressive

air armada, just 166 were modern fighters. The rest were patently outdated aircraft inferior to their French and British counterparts. Moreover, nothing in the entire Regia Aeronautica, Italy's Royal Air Force, matched the former's Dewoitine D.250.

Mussolini's son, Romano, recalled after the war how "the reports *Il Duce* received talked about 'flawless aeronautical equipment fully prepared to meet future challenges.' In reality, the Spanish exploit had drained Italy's arsenal, which had been greatly reduced during the Ethiopian War."⁵

The Regia Aeronautica was a victim of rapid developments in military aviation, developments with which it was unable to keep up. The Spanish Civil War in the air had begun as a replay of 1918 over the Western Front, with fabric-covered biplanes powered by radial air-cooled engines, chasing each other around the skies above Madrid in aerobic "dog fights," but ended with all-metal, hit-and-run monoplanes that outsped their opponents, thanks in large measure to new, in-line liquid-cooled power plants. The Italians took no notice of this transformation, even though they flew in the midst of it, because they were misled by their early successes over similar double-deckers operated by the enemy. So entrenched was their World War I mentality that Italian pilots objected to the modern enclosed cabin of their country's first production monoplane fighter, the Fiat G.50 *Freccia*, or "Arrow," demanding a return of the open cockpit. Worse, the chosen successor to Italy's antiquated Fiat CR.32 biplane was another Fiat double-decker. While the CR.42 *Falco*, "Falcon," was undoubtedly the best of its kind, it was also the last and did not signify a step in the right direction of future developments but back into the past.

The reality of post-Spanish Civil War Italian airpower stood unrevealed until tested over the south of France, when Mussolini's armed forces invaded on June 21, 1940. While Regia Aeronautica pilots fought with skill and daring, their slow underdefended bombers and antiquated biplane fighters were savaged by modern monoplanes of the *Armée de l'Air*. The nine-day-long campaign was a painful eye-opener to Regia Aeronautica inadequacies, which were hurriedly addressed, at least partially, in the *Corpo Aereo Italiano*.

Its original 3 *Stormi* of 87 fighters, 5 reconnaissance planes, and 78 bombers were dispatched to Wehrmacht-occupied Belgium, where they operated in concert with the German Luftwaffe against British coastal cities beginning on November 11, 1940. This "Italian Air Corps" was later joined by another *Squadriglia* of CANT Z.1007bi long-range

reconnaissance trimotors, several Caproni Ca.164 communications planes, and a Savoia-Marchetti SM.75 all-purpose transport, amounting to somewhat under 300 aircraft staffed and operated by 600 personnel of all ranks.

Although Allied propaganda characterized them as incompetent airmen effortlessly annihilated by British defenders, the Italians, in fact, achieved their objectives—blasting important harbor works and, more importantly, diverting RAF interceptors from London, where the Luftwaffe concentrated the brunt of its attacks. The Italian fighters' sole purpose was to escort their Fiat BR.20 *Cicogna* medium-bombers to targets at Felixtowe, Harwich, Ramsgate Harbor, and Folkstone, not to seek out enemy interceptors. But in the inevitable confrontations that ensued with the RAF, the Fiat *Falco* biplanes gave as good as they got, shooting down 10 *Hurricanes* and *Spitfires* for as many *Falcons* lost over the English Channel.

The *Corpo Aereo Italiano* was withdrawn from Belgium in April 1941, having successfully fulfilled its missions during the Battle of Britain, to join the fighting in North Africa. It was there that Mussolini's special trust in his air force seemed justified by Muti's audacious raids and was bolstered the following month when Italian warplanes single-handedly crushed a British offensive against Sudan. The aircraft largely responsible for this victory was the Fiat CR.42 *Falco*, generally regarded obsolete prior to 1940 but nonetheless Italy's most numerous frontline fighter when she declared war on the Western Allies in June of that year.

The *Falcon*, as mentioned, was the product of misinterpreted success generated by its immediate predecessor. In 380 air battles during the Spanish Civil War, the Fiat CR.32 demonstrated a marked superiority over all its Russian and French counterparts operated by the Republicans, thereby convincing Italian Air Ministry officials that only an upgrading of the trusty biplane was necessary to provide the Regia Aeronautica with a truly modern fighter. Instead, the *Falco*, for all its excellent qualities, was outdated before its first specimen rolled off the production lines in May 1939. Reliable, tough, stable, easy to fly, and able to absorb terrific punishment, the CR.42 was nevertheless markedly inferior to Britain's Supermarine *Spitfire* and, to a lesser extent, Hawker *Hurricane*, although more than a match for the RAF's own biplane, the Gloster *Gladiator*.

Particularly in the hands of an experienced pilot, the *Falco* was never, however, an easy victim, and its war record from the Mediterranean and Africa to Britain and Russia was consistently exemplary. The



Last and best of their breed, these Fiat *Falcons* were far more dangerous opponents than implied by their obsolete appearance. (Courtesy Art-Tech)

CR.42 was a sought-after export, equipping frontline fighter units of the Belgian and Swedish air forces. Hungary was first to purchase the *Falco*, ordering 52 machines in summer 1938, almost a full year before the airplane went into production, so impressed with its prototype were officers of the *Magyar Királyi Légierő*. Their expectations were not disappointed, as the four squadrons of *Falcons* performed effectively on the Eastern Front. By December 1941, pilots of the 1/3 Squadron alone had flown some 300 sorties after five months of continuous operations, destroying 17 Soviet aircraft in combat for the loss of two CR-42s.

The *Falco* was remarkable for its wide and enduring versatility. Just eight machines, each carrying a pair of 221-pound bombs, operated from Sardinian airfields in the antishipping role, achieving notable success, particularly as part of Italy's battle against Allied convoys in mid-August 1942.

But it was as a night fighter that the *Falco* particularly excelled. At the beginning of World War II, the Regia Aeronautica had no such specialized aircraft in this field and resorted to the Fiat biplane as an

emergency improvisation. Modified with shrouded exhausts, it was endowed with complete navigational instrumentation and state-of-the-art radio equipment. Pilots appreciated the unobstructed visibility of an open cockpit, especially during bright moonlight operations.

The first experimental version was tested in Libya during 1941, when five enemy aircraft were downed in quick succession without loss to the Italians. Thereafter, the *Caccia Notturna*, or “Night Hunters,” was formed with 80 *Falcons*. Their “kill” rate so impressed Hermann Goering, he equipped enough CR.42s for his own Luftwaffe to outfit a pair of *Nachtschlachtgruppe*, or “Night Harassment Groups.” NSGr.9 contributed to the Germans’ successful 1943–1944 defense at Anzio, on the Italian west coast, and NSGr.7 operated over the Balkans until the last day of the war. Due to its heavy armament and slow-flight capabilities, the *Falco* was additionally valued for its effectiveness in anti-partisan warfare.

Relegated to ground-support duties by growing numbers of more modern enemy fighters, the CR.42 participated with distinction across the Libyan Desert, dropping its ordinance with precision on Anglo-American troops and vehicles. An up-graded version representing the culmination of its type entered service in March 1941. Known as the “DB” for the 1,100-hp Daimler-Benz 601 E engine it mounted, the suped-up *Falco* could reach 320 mph, making it the fastest military biplane in history, able to defend itself on equal terms with many Allied monoplanes.

CR.42 losses rose steeply from October 1942, when the entire Axis effort was thrown into disarray by German *Afrika Korps* General Erwin Rommel’s defeat at El Alamein. By the close of the North African Campaign the following May, only 82 *Falcons* survived for evacuation to Italy. Of the 1,781 examples manufactured, just 64 were still serviceable at the time of the Italian armistice in September 1943. Developments in air combat nevertheless pushed the biplane toward extinction.

Less successful was the Regia Aeronautica’s ability to field an effective dive-bomber. An early attempt at producing such a type, the Breda Ba.88 *Lince*, initially offered great promise by repeating its early reputation as the fastest aircraft in the sky, consistently beating four French and German world speed records, one after the other, from February 3 to December 9, 1937. Had the sleek, all-metal, high-performance champion been assigned to liaison or reconnaissance duties, it would have undoubtedly served useful purposes. Instead, the “Lynx” was forced to undergo conversion into an *aeroplano di combattimento*, burdened

with extra self-sealing fuel tanks, three 12.7 mm and one 7.7 mm Breda-SAFAT machine guns, plus a 2,204-pound payload.

Thus stressed beyond its design parameters, with a loaded weight of 14,881 pounds, maximum speed rapidly fell off, and its military contract was canceled by early 1940, but resumed in spring after modifications aimed at rectifying some of its most offensive aerodynamic defects were made. Accordingly, a few, early-production examples were rushed to underdefended Sardinia in anticipation of a French invasion. On June 19, 1940, the Bredas successfully, and without loss to themselves, attacked enemy airfields on Corsica, where opposition from neither ground nor sky was encountered, although pilots of two *Gruppi* flying them reported instability and poor handling. They also complained bitterly of the cramped canopy's very limited field of vision; lateral and ground views were effectively blocked by the twin Piaggio P.XI RC. 40 radial engines, seriously puny at just 1,000 hp apiece.

Despite these misgivings, several dozen specimens were dispatched to Libya, where ground-attack aircraft were desperately needed to counter the onslaught of British armored vehicles. Italian airmen of the 7th *Gruppo* found their Ba.88s so underpowered, two were unable to even take off, and a third, once airborne, could not execute turns. The other 61 examples were permanently grounded, ignominiously scattered around operational airfields as decoys for attacking enemy warplanes. In the words of aviation historian David Mondey, the *Lynx* “represented, perhaps, the most remarkable failure of any operational aircraft to see service in World War Two.”⁶

Its terrible disappointment left Mussolini's ground forces in the lurch. All they had to oppose growing hordes of British tanks was another, older Breda. The Ba.65 was a big, rugged, all-metal, single-engine, low-wing monoplane armed with a pair of 12.7 mm Breda-SAFATs, plus two more 7.7 mm machine guns, able to carry 1,102 pounds of bombs. A veteran of the Spanish Civil War, it was first flown operationally by *Aviazione Legionaria* pilots, one of whom shot down a Tupolev SB-2 bomber over Soria on July 24, 1936—a remarkable “kill” beyond the purview of an *aeroplano di combattimento*: the Soviet victim had a superior speed, 10 mph faster than its opponent.

In August of the next year, the Bredas acquitted themselves well with the 65a *Squadriglia*, contributing to Nationalist victories at Santander, followed by more successes over Teruel and in battles for the Ebro River, where they capably supported Franco's army. Throughout the war, they flew 1,921 sorties, including 368 ground- strafing runs and 59

dive-bombing attacks, losing 12 of the original 23 machines with which they began the conflict. The remaining 11 were donated to the Spaniards at the close of hostilities because the design was obsolete by that time, and production terminated in July 1939 after 218 examples had been built. Survivors were in the process of being phased out, and only about 150 were left, most of them having been relegated to advanced training roles when, one year later, they suddenly found themselves recalled to frontline duty as replacements for the failed *Lynx*. The retired Ba.65s were hopelessly outdated, virtually all of them falling in a few months under the guns of British *Hurricanes* and *Spitfires*, achieving little for their sacrifice.

Italy's *aeroplano di combattimento* crisis was ultimately resolved, however, with the timely arrival of the world's foremost dive-bomber. Learning of his ally's dilemma, Hermann Goering came to the rescue by dispatching 52 Junkers Ju.87s, which landed at Comiso airfield, in Sicily, on August 21, 1940. These consisted of standard B.2 versions and B.2/Tropicals, the latter especially suited for desert operations. Together, they formed the 96th *Gruppo* under the command of *Captaino* Ercolani, the 236th *Squadriglia* led by *Tenant* E. Malvezzi, and *Tenant* G. Santinoni's 237th *Squadriglia*.

Famous as the *Stuka* (short for *Sturzkampfflugzeug*, "diving warplane") to the outside world, the Italians nicknamed Germany's gull-wing dive-bomber the *Picchiatelli*, or "Spade," employing it with such success, the Reichsmarschall sent them another 50 in November. These were long-range Ju.87 R-2/Trop. models fitted under each wing with additional fuel tanks capable of being jettisoned in the event of an emergency. They went to the 97th *Gruppo*, *Captaino* Moscatelli commanding, and *Tenant* Bertuzzi's 238th *Squadriglia*. During late spring 1942, the last batch of *Stukas* to arrive in Libya comprised 54 of the type's best variants, the D-2 and D-3, with more refined streamlining for increased speed and heavier armament. All were lost before late October–early November's decisive Battle of El Alamein.

Following the North African Campaign in July 1943, more Ju.87Ds went to 121 *Gruppo*, commanded by *Maggiore* Orlandini, *Capitano* Zucca's 206 *Squadriglia*, and 216 *Squadriglia* led by *Capitano* Pergoli. Against an enemy air armada, their 46 *Picchiatelli* scored some significant hits on Allied forces landing at Sicily, as demonstrated by *Tenant* Giuseppe Cenni, former commander of the 239th *Squadriglia*, now in charge of the 102nd *Gruppo*. Nicknamed the "Little Dancer" by fellow officers for his diminutive, five-foot-three-inch stature and graceful flying



Germany's famous *Stuka* dive bomber also equipped the Axis air forces of Italy, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia. (Library of Congress)

skills, beginning in late 1940, he sank the 8,018-ton, enemy transport *Talamba* and so severely damaged HMS *Erebus* that the 8,450-ton monitor, with her pair of 15-inch guns, had to be withdrawn from combat. Before 1941 was out, some of Cenni's most notable victims included the 1,102-ton Greek freighter *Ioanna*; the British tanker *Helka* (3,741 tons); Australia's 1,090-ton destroyer, *Waterhen*; a Royal Navy gunboat, the 645-ton *Cricket*; and a 1,520 ton, mine-laying submarine, H.M.S. *Cachalot*. He was involved in fierce action during several running battles against Allied shipping, especially Operation *Pedestal*, when Italo-German forces virtually annihilated a large British convoy steaming through the Central Mediterranean Sea to the relief of Malta in August 1942.

He flew his last sortie not in a *Picchiatelli* but leading 12 Reggiane Re.2002 *Ariete* ("Ram") fighter-bombers of 5 *Stormo* over south coastal Italy. On September 4, 1943, they inflicted serious casualties on Anglo-American troops by repeatedly strafing the invasion beaches at Villa San Giovanni and Reggio Calabria, then attacked U.S. landing craft, sinking four LCTs and damaging several others before being bounced by 30 *Spitfires*. Although most of the *Arietes* fought their way out, three pilots were lost in the uneven struggle, among them the "Little Dancer."

His death had been preceded during the Sicilian Campaign on July 13, when all but one of eight *Picchiatelli* from the 121st *Gruppo Tuffatori* flying against the invaders at Augustus had been brought down.

Throughout World War II, the Italian Air Force was a strange mix of excellence and obsolescence; of superb designs and botched concepts; of pilots at once skillful and old fashioned. Even 324 specimens of the hopelessly outclassed CR.32 were still in frontline service at the start of hostilities. Regia Aeronautica commanders had the good sense, however, to relegate them to strafing sorties, where they did win some notable success, such as the destruction of numerous British and South African aircraft caught on the ground in a surprise raid during the final phase of the fighting for Italian East Africa on February 4, 1941.

The development of modern aircraft for the Regia Aeronautica was particularly hampered because of insufficient power generated by Italian engines. A case in point was the Fiat G.50 *Freccia* cited earlier. Powered by a standard 840-hp A.74 RC.38 14-cylinder radial piston engine, it barely topped 290 mph. But installed with a Daimler-Benz 601 engine, the same airframe increased its speed by more than 70 mph. The German engines were not as readily available, however, so most of the 421 *Arrows* had to make do with lesser Italian power plants.



Fiat's *Arrow* was a lackluster replacement of the company's aging biplanes, but was just about all the Regia Aeronautica had to oppose the Allied invasion of Italy. (Courtesy Art-Tech)

On the evening of July 9, 1941, *Sergente Maggiore* Aldo Buvoli of 378a *Squadriglia*, 155° *Gruppo Autonomo*, took off in a *Freccia* from the Castelbenito airfield to patrol the harbor of Tripoli, where he duly intercepted seven British light-bombers executing low-level attacks on warships of the Regia Marina, the Italian Navy. Buvoli singlehandedly shot down four of the Bristol Blenheims in short order; the remaining three fled, and the Italian vessels were spared further damages. During the opening phase of the Sicilian invasion of July 10, 1943, the by-then wholly obsolete G.50 was the most numerous plane used by the Regia Aeronautica to counterattack Allied landings. Forty-five *Freccias* of 158° and 159° *Gruppo Assalto*, from Pistoia, attacked Allied ships, landing craft and troops. Earlier, the top-scoring G.50 pilot was Furio Lauri, credited with 11 “kills” before the end of 1941, attaining a final tally of 18. By then, as a sure sign of the G.50’s inferiority to enemy types, it was gradually consigned to the same ground-attack role undertaken by the even more dated CR.32s and 42s. By early 1943, the G.50 had slipped even further down the Regia Aeronautica hierarchy to become a trainer.

In general appearance similar to the failed G.50 was the Macchi MC.200 *Saetta*, or “Thunderbolt.” Early flight testing in 1938 boded well for the design when it reached 500 mph in a dive. But two years later, when Italy found herself at war, only 150 specimens were available; production later topped 1,100. The *Saetta*’s baptism of fire came while protecting bombers over Malta in autumn 1940. Provided with auxiliary fuel tanks, a respectable range of 540 miles made it an ideal escort, although only a pair of 12.7-mm Breda-SAFAT machine-guns were mounted in the upper cowling. Some later versions added two more 7.7-mm machine-guns in the wings, but firepower was still weak. With a maximum speed of 313 mph at 14,760 feet, the MC.200 served with distinction on the Eastern Front, shooting down 88 Soviet aircraft for the loss of only 15 *Thunderbolts*. In North Africa, however, they more often fell prey to superior Anglo-American warplanes.

The *Saetta*’s decided inferiority did not deter Italian airmen from performing their duties, however, often under extraordinary circumstances. On January 30, 1942, 10 MC.200s were escorting a dozen German-flown *Stukas* after they had attacked the North African port of Tobruk. Returning from their mission, the Axis formation was intercepted by twice as many American-built Curtiss P-40 fighters. “Fighting to their limits,” according to the Italian Deputy Chief of Staff, General Santoro, the Macchi pilots successfully defended their allies, enabling