



JG 26

Top Guns of the Luftwaffe

Donald Caldwell
Foreword by Adolf Galland



JG26

to the fighter pilots

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JG26: Top Guns of the Luftwaffe

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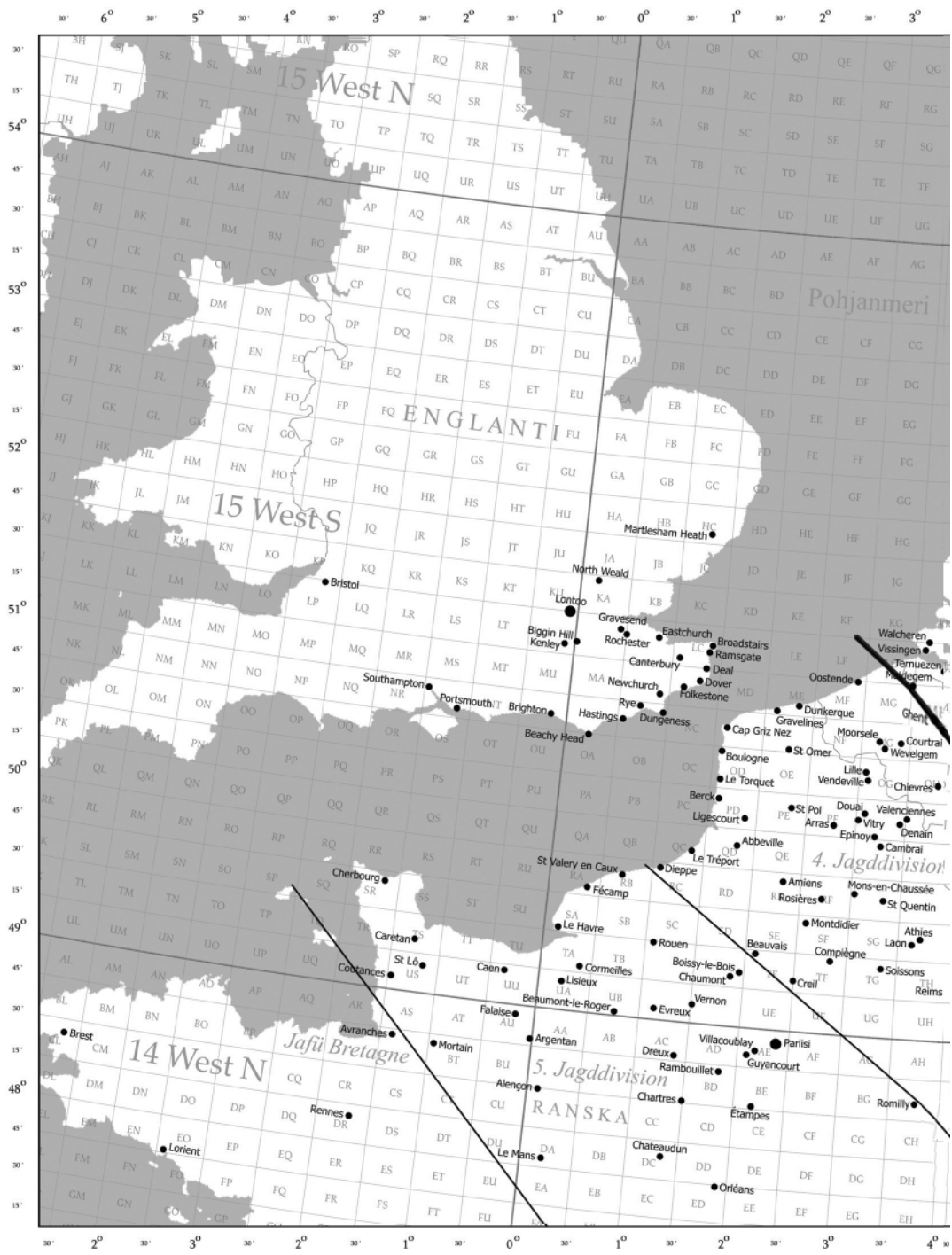
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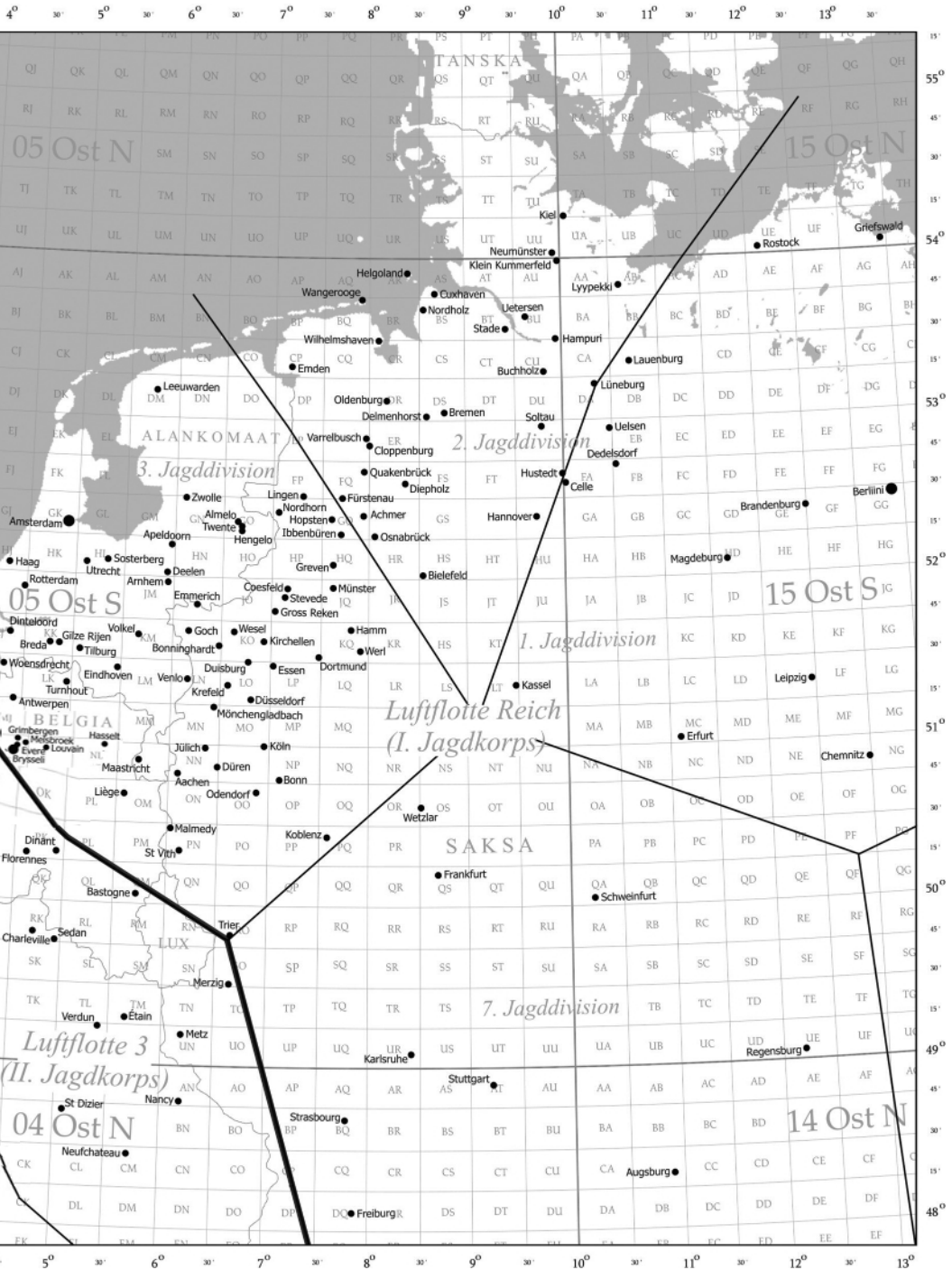
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FOREWORD

Generalleutnant Adolf Galland, Ret.

I AM PLEASED TO COMPLY WITH THE AUTHOR'S REQUEST TO WRITE A foreword to this book, the first detailed history of a Luftwaffe combat unit to be written by an American in the English language. This unit, Jagdgeschwader 26 "Schlageter," JG 26, was one with which I had a long and close relationship. In my travels I am frequently reminded of the English-speaking world's continued fascination with World War II fighter combat. It is therefore surprising that only a few balanced portrayals of the German side of the air war have appeared in English. Many authors have stressed the exploits of the Experten, or aces, while paying little attention to the day-to-day activities of the fighter units and their average pilots. Before you can claim a true understanding of the air war, you must know something of the accomplishments and sacrifices of the individual combat units. This book thus attempts to fill a real gap.

After the loss of World War I, Germany could only manage to train a few dozen fighter pilots and some reconnaissance crews, contrary to the Versailles treaty. This nucleus was transferred to other assignments and used to build up the entire Luftwaffe, so that the fighter arm was understaffed and played an inferior role as a defense force from the very beginning. Fundamental mistakes were made. Great Britain was never considered as a potential adversary; later, the performance of the young Luftwaffe, which had expanded too rapidly, was totally overestimated.

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After using many tricks, I was able to join the Luftwaffe fighter force, and in June 1940 I was transferred to JG 26 to take over its Third Gruppe. From that time on, JG 26 was always my favorite fighter unit in the Luftwaffe. Since my two brothers Paul and Wilhelm, both successful fighter pilots, were killed in JG 26—the former as a *Staffelkapitän* (Squadron Leader) and the latter as a *Gruppenkommandeur* (Group Commander)—this has indeed been “my wing.”

You might well wonder, as I did, why the author, who is an American and a member of the postwar generation, selected JG 26 as the subject of his book. He has told me that he originally planned to write a history of the *Jagdflieger*, the Luftwaffe’s fighter arm. A desire to stress the human side of Luftwaffe service forced him to narrow his scope, and his attention was ultimately drawn to JG 26, one of the best German fighter units for much of the war, and the one most respected by the Royal Air Force and the United States Army Air Force. The history of this one unit encompasses in microcosm the rise and fall of the entire German fighter arm, and it remains the Luftwaffe unit best known in the English-speaking world—although as the “Abbeville Kids” rather than by its correct designation. The author interviewed fifty former members of JG 26, from *Kommodore* to enlisted pilot, plus many members of the ground staff. To ensure the impartiality and completeness of the book, the official records of both sides were searched, and the true course of events in a number of air battles was reestablished for the first time. In its quest for historical objectivity, the book does not gloss over unpleasant facts, especially those concerning conditions in the late 1944–1945 Luftwaffe, after the course of the war had turned irrevocably against Germany. It is almost a miracle that the complete breakdown of pilot morale did not occur prior to D-Day in 1944, when the total collapse was more than obvious.

Even though there is an excellent German history of JG 26 in existence, written by Josef Priller and Otto Boehm, the present work is the best fulfillment that we could wish for. The book inevitably contains errors—the Luftwaffe destroyed most of its records at war’s end, and men’s memories of events fifty years ago must be considered fallible. Nevertheless, I feel that this book, with its unique

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perspective on the air war, is a suitable memorial to the fallen men of Jagdgeschwader 26 "Schlageter."

Thanks to Donald L. Caldwell, and success to his profound book, written in full fairness.

ADOLF GALLAND
January 1991

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MY GREATEST DEBT OF GRATITUDE IS OWED TO THE VETERANS OF THE Geschwader whose enthusiastic cooperation made this book possible. I shall never cease to be amazed that my written appeals for assistance—which came from a stranger, a novice author, and a former enemy—were answered with such an outpouring of documents, photographs, and amazingly frank first-person accounts. I am proud that I can now call many of these men my friends. They are: Hermann Ayerle, Ernst Battmer, F. W. Bauerhenne, Guenther Bloemertz, Karl Boehm-Tettelbach, Matthias Buchmann, Joseph Buerschgens, Peter Crump, Heinz Ebeling (deceased), Georg Eder (deceased), Guenther Egli, Xaver Ellenrieder, Adolf Galland, Heinz Gehrke, Georg Genth, Adolf Glunz, Alfred Heckmann, Walter Horten, Erich Jauer, Gerhard Kemen, Gerhard Kroll, Walter Krupinski, Ottomar Kruse, Hans Kukla, Erwin Leykauf, Willi Luerding, Werner Molge, Johannes Naumann, Edu Neumann, Josef Niesmak, Wolfgang Pils, Rolf Pingel, Wolfgang Polster, Hans Prager, Hans-Werner Regenauer, Heinrich Schild, Gottfried Schmidt, Walter Schmidt, Friedrich Schneider, Gerhard Schoepfel, Rolf Schroedter (deceased), Otto Stammberger, Walter Stumpf, Siegfried Sy (deceased), Erhard Tippe, Fritz Ungar, and Gerd Wiegand. Special thanks are owed to Adolf Galland for the foreword and to Joseph Buerschgens for hand-carrying it and the manuscript across two continents.

My search for participants from the “other side,” while neces-

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sarily less exhaustive, was equally rewarding. My thanks go to the following USAAF and RCAF veterans: William Beyer, William Binnebose, George Brooks, William Capron, George Carpenter, H. H. Christensen, Elmer Clarey, McCauley Clark, Darrell Cramer, Jack Curtis, Bernard Dennehy, James Doyle, Walker Mahurin, Merle Olmsted, Chet Patterson, Herman Schonenberg, Robert Seelos, Luther Smith, Rod Smith, John Truluck, George van den Heuvel, Chuck Yeager, and Hubert Zemke.

I must next acknowledge the air war historians and archivists who welcomed me into their fraternity with generous gifts of time, leads, photographs, and information. These men are: Arno Abendroth, Bernd Barbas, Steve Blake, Winfried Bock, Walt Boyne, James Crow, Joachim Eickhoff, Pat Eriksson, Vanackere Etienne, John Foreman, Werner Girbig, Steve Gotts, Peter Grimm, Ian Hawkins, Carl Hildebrandt, Jim Kitchens, Dave McFarland, Michael Meyer, Eric Mombeek, Werner Oeltjebruns, Michael Payne, Gert Poelchau, W. G. Ramsey, Jean-Louis Roba, Chris Shores, Guenter Sundermann, Helmut Terbeck, Lothair Vanoverbeke, and Tony Wood.

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Motorbuch Verlag has granted me permission to quote translated passages from Josef Priller's *JG 26: Geschichte eines Jagdgeschwaders*. The Bundesarchiv Bildarchiv (Koblenz) and the Imperial War Museum (London) have granted permission to reprint photographs from their collections.

I wish to acknowledge the help given me by the professional staffs of the British Public Records Office, the Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv (Freiburg), the Lake Jackson Public Library, the Military Archives Division of the National Archives, the United States Air Force Historical Research Center, and the United States Air Force Museum.

I further wish to thank the USAF Historical Research Center for their tangible support of this work in the form of a USAF-HRC Research Grant.

Last but by no means least, my thanks go to my wife, Jackie, for her unwavering patience and support.

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I apologize to any correspondent who cannot find his story or photograph in this volume. Because of the commercial realities of the publishing business, this book has had to be cut severely in length. Additional volumes on JG 26, including a photo album and a war diary, will be published if the success of this first book warrants them.

Any book of this size and scope will contain errors of both omission and commission. I welcome correspondence with anyone who has information to share pertaining to this fascinating period in aviation history. I wish to state further that all quotations in the book that were originally written or spoken in the German language were translated into English by myself. The responsibility for any consequent errors in fact or tone is my own.

DONALD L. CALDWELL
Lake Jackson, Texas
April 1990

INTRODUCTION

ASK ANY WORLD WAR II VETERAN OF THE AMERICAN EIGHTH AIR FORCE or the Royal Air Force's Fighter Command about the Abbeville Kids, and he'll tell you stories of Goering's elite yellow-nosed fighter unit, whose ferocious, slashing attacks on the Allied bomber and fighter formations always seemed to come from the most favorable tactical position—either from head-on, or from out of the sun. Their fame was legendary; their complex of bases behind the French coast of the English Channel was to be avoided, if at all possible.

Read the official Allied histories of the air war, and you'll get a different story. The Luftwaffe had had no elite fighter units; therefore, the Abbeville Kids had never existed. Period. What was the truth? As always in war, "truth" was a flexible commodity, to be molded as needed by the propagandists. Generals rarely praise an enemy's exploits "on the record"; to do so encourages an excess of respect, or even fear, for the opposition. However, Allied air intelligence, and thus the Allied High Command, kept a watchful eye from 1941 to mid-1944 on one specific German fighter unit, the one they considered to be the best in the Luftwaffe—Jagdgeschwader 26, commonly abbreviated JG 26. JG 26 gained its greatest notoriety in 1942, when its most successful subordinate unit was based at Abbeville in northern France. The nicknames "Abbeville Boys" and "Abbeville Kids" were coined by the opposing Allied aircrews. The German pilots heard the terms from

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captured airmen and good-naturedly adopted the names for themselves.

It is true that JG 26 was never officially designated by the Luftwaffe as an elite formation. It became one, nevertheless; initially as a result of outstanding leadership, and then as a natural outgrowth of its war station on the Channel coast, where its mission was to fend off attacks by the best aircraft and airmen that the Allies could muster. For two years, JG 26, with no more than 124 fighters under command, dominated the airspace over northern France and western Belgium. It fought against the Western Allies for the entire war and flew its last missions against the British one day before the armistice that ended the fighting on its front.

This is the story of the men behind the legend.

1 ORIGINS 1935 – 1939

THE RESURGENT LUFTWAFFE

THE THROATY ROAR OF AIRCRAFT ENGINES REVERBERATED FOR miles down the river valley. The Rhine barge crews looked upstream. Three dots soon became recognizable as small biplanes, in close formation. The aircraft, Heinkel He 51 fighters, were less than twenty feet above the water and left wakes in the blackish-green Rhine. As the fighters passed the barges, the men below could recognize their bright orange cowlings and waved enthusiastically. The pilots responded by gently rocking their wings and proceeded downstream. Jagdgeschwader 234, “the Rhineland’s own” fighter wing, was on patrol.

The fighters had arrived the previous year, as part of the German military force that had moved into the Rhineland. Only one Jagdgruppe (fighter group) of the still-tiny Luftwaffe had participated in the operation. On 7 March 1936, Hptm. Oskar Dinort, the Gruppenkommandeur (group commander) of the Third Gruppe of Jagdgeschwader 134 (abbreviated III/JG 134), was informed of Hitler’s decision to reoccupy Germany’s western border states, which had remained demilitarized by treaty after the withdrawal of Allied occupation forces in 1930. The Rhineland was to return to the protection of the German Reich. Two Staffeln (squadrons) of Dinort’s Gruppe were ordered to circle the cathedral of Cologne at

noon on 8 March and then land at the Cologne airport. A Ju 52 transport carrying ammunition for the He 51s of the Gruppe was to meet them at the airport. The mission was duly carried out, and the ammunition was loaded in the fighters. Their guns could not have been fired even if they had been needed, however, as the fighters lacked their synchronization gear.

Hitler's bluff proved successful. Germany's former enemies made no response. At this time the German Luftwaffe, itself forbidden by the Versailles treaty, was barely one year old. On 1 March 1935, the Reichsluftwaffe had been proclaimed by Adolf Hitler as the third service arm of the Wehrmacht (armed forces) of the German Reich. Hermann Goering, Air Minister in Hitler's government, was named Commander-in-Chief. On its day of origin, the new service, soon to be known both inside and outside Germany simply as the Luftwaffe (literally, air force), contained a single fighter unit. This formation, of squadron strength, had been activated at Doeberitz on 1 April 1934 and was equipped with a mixture of Arado Ar 65 and Heinkel He 51 biplane fighters.

The squadron was soon enlarged into a full two-Gruppe Jagdgeschwader (fighter wing), designated Jagdgeschwader 132, and was awarded the honor title "Richthofen," after Germany's most famous fighter pilot. The Richthofen Geschwader provided a cadre of fully trained fighter pilots to serve as flight and Staffel leaders in the rapidly expanding Jagdwaffe (fighter arm). The staff of the Reichswehr, the defense force that the Versailles treaty permitted Germany, had kept close tabs on the veteran pilots from the World War. These men were now offered commissions into senior flying command positions. Non-flying commanders and staff officers, and senior enlisted ground staff, were drafted from the 100,000-man Reichswehr. The German aviation industry had stayed current by building designs for foreign customers; for Lufthansa, the state-owned airline; and for the numerous German "sport flying" organizations. A number of enthusiastic young pilots had been trained under various subterfuges. The Jagdwaffe was therefore able to expand rapidly.

A second fighter wing, Jagdgeschwader 134 "Horst Wessel," had grown to full three-Gruppe strength by early 1936. Hptm. Dinort's III/JG 134 soon split from its parent unit. As noted above, it was ordered to move to Germany's western border regions on 8

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March 1936. III/JG 134 was assigned permanent bases in the Rhineland, where it formed the nucleus of a new Geschwader which was ultimately to become JG 26. Dinort's third Staffel, the 7th (7/JG 134), left the Gruppe on 8 March, flying from Cologne to nearby Duesseldorf. This unit, renumbered 5/JG 134, remained in Duesseldorf for more than a year as an independent Jagdstaffel (fighter squadron), flying a mixture of Ar 65s, Ar 68s, and He 51s. The rest of III/JG 134, comprising the Stab (staff), the 8th and 9th Staffeln, and a newly formed 7th Staffel, settled in with their He 51s at the Cologne airport.

On 11 January 1937 a new Geschwader headquarters was activated at the Duesseldorf airport. The new unit was designated Jagdgeschwader 234, but at first commanded no flying units. On 3 March Major Werner Rentsch activated a new, independent fighter Gruppe, II/JG 234, at Duesseldorf, from a cadre provided by 5/JG 134. The Gruppe's three Staffeln (the 4th, 5th, and 6th) were equipped with Arado Ar 68 biplanes. Veterans of the period retain fond memories of the mock dogfights between the Arados of II/JG 234 and the Heinkels of III/JG 134.

III/JG 134, now under Hptm. Walter Grabmann, was redesignated I/JG 234 on 15 March 1937. Its Staffeln were renumbered, becoming the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Staffeln of JG 234. The Gruppe was soon re-equipped with the Luftwaffe's new monoplane fighter, the Messerschmitt Bf 109B, and moved on 8 June 1937 to a new Luftwaffe airbase at Cologne-Ostheim.

II/JG 234 began receiving its Bf 109Bs in November 1937. The Geschwader was the second, after JG 132 "Richthofen," to be fully equipped with the Messerschmitt fighter. The Bf 109 was to become the world's most-produced fighter, and one of its most famous. Willy Messerschmitt's elegantly simple monoplane was a radical departure from Germany's previous fighters, both in its light construction and in its high wing loading. The first production version, the Bf 109B, was powered by a Junkers Jumo 210D inverted-vee liquid cooled engine of 720 horsepower and had a top speed of 290 mph and a service ceiling of 26,900 feet. It was armed with only three rifle-caliber machine guns, 7.9-mm MG 17s, but the wings were soon adapted to take armament, and the next models, the Bf 109C and Bf 109D, carried two MG 17s in the wings and two above the engine. Initial production rates were low, as Mes-

serschmitt considered these variants to be only interim models until the much more powerful engines for which the fighter had been designed became available. Interim or not, the Bf 109B was superior in performance to any other fighter in service in continental Europe, a fact soon to be made manifestly plain over the Spanish battlefields.

THE CONDOR LEGION

On 25 July 1936, Adolf Hitler was approached in Berlin by a Spanish officer bearing a letter from General Francisco Franco, the leader of the Spanish Nationalist insurgents. Franco requested a few Ju 52 transports to assist him in moving his Moroccan troops across the Strait of Gibraltar to the Spanish mainland. Hitler assented at once, setting in motion an extended trial period for the Luftwaffe's men and machines that lasted for almost three years and established the doctrines that governed the Luftwaffe in the World War to come.

A full-sized German air fleet, the Condor Legion, was soon operational in Spain. The Ju 52s were flown in by air; other aid had to be smuggled past the Republican blockade in ships. The first shipload included six dismantled He 51 fighters and their pilots, led by the young Oblt. Hannes Trautloft, "on leave" from 9/JG 134 in Cologne. At least two more of the original six pilots, Lt. Herwig Knueppel and Lt. Wolf-Heinrich Freiherr von Houwald, were also from III/JG 134. During the nearly three years of the Spanish Civil War, 126 commissioned pilots and 200 enlisted pilots served in Jagdgruppe 88 (J88), the Condor Legion's fighter component. This number was equal to one-half of all the fighter pilots serving in Germany in May 1939. Thus a substantial percentage of JG 26's prewar pilots saw combat in Spain. The most famous of these men at the time of his Spanish service was Hptm. Gotthardt Handrick, the winner of the modern pentathlon in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Handrick took command of Jagdgruppe 88 in mid-1937 and assumed command of I/JG 26 on his return to Germany in July 1938. Another JG 26 "name" who served in Spain was Adolf Galland, who in late 1937 at the age of 25 was given command of 3/J88, the third of the Gruppe's three Staffeln. Unfortunately for Galland, his Staffel was the last to be re-equipped with Bf 109s, and his tour in Spain was spent flying He 51s in the ground support role. On his

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return from Spain he was considered an “attack pilot” and was given command of a Staffel of Henschel Hs 123 ground assault aircraft, which he led in the Polish campaign in the fall of 1939, and from which he escaped only through subterfuge—he persuaded a flight surgeon that he could no longer fly in the open-cockpit biplanes for “medical reasons” and was ordered to a Bf 109 unit in time for the Western campaign the following spring.

Spanish service was much sought after by ambitious officers of the Jagdwaffe, promising a short, guaranteed tour of duty, a chance to gain a reputation while sharpening combat skills, and an almost guaranteed promotion upon return to the homeland. Understandably, the German pilots’ opportunities in Spain were not entirely without risk. At least four pilots from JG 26’s predecessor units were killed while on duty in Spain.

The development of tactical doctrine was as important to the German airmen in Spain as the testing of men and equipment. Close support of infantry, with ground control; mass bombing of population centers; large scale aerial resupply—all were tested first in Spain. Of most importance to JG 26 was the development of fighter formations and doctrine. In 1937, the Condor Legion flew in the same close formations as the rest of the world’s air forces, based on the Kette of three aircraft. After its introduction to service, the Germans quickly realized that the Bf 109B, the fastest service fighter in the world, was unsuited for these close formations. Werner Moelders, Galland’s successor in command of 3/J88, is credited with the development of the “finger four” Schwarm (flight) formation, so-called because the relationship of its four aircraft resembled that of the fingertips of an outstretched hand. His most important innovation, however, was the Rotte, or element of two aircraft, which became the basic fighting unit. The job of the Rottenfuehrer, or element leader, was to attack; the job of the Rottenflieger, or wingman, was to protect and follow his leader. Lateral spacing between aircraft was increased to two hundred yards, the turning radius of the Bf 109. The aircraft could thus break together, to attack, or toward one another, for mutual defense. The Schwarm was 600 yards across and was hard to maneuver as a unit until Moelders developed the cross-over turn, in which the outside aircraft of the formation made the sharpest turn. He also staggered the Schwaerme (flights) of each Staffel in altitude, which both im-

proved the ability of the formation's pilots to sight the enemy and made the formation itself less conspicuous in the glare of the sun. The formation leader was able to control his widely spaced unit by means of radio.

Moelders's reports to the Luftwaffe High Command in 1938 and 1939 resulted in the reorganization of the Jagdwaffe from units of three aircraft, the Kette, to units of four, the Schwarm. This did not require a major change in the tables of organization, since the strength of a Staffel remained the same, twelve aircraft (four Ketten became three Schwaerme). As it was standard doctrine for the Geschwaderkommodore (wing commander) and each Gruppenkommandeur to lead flights containing their staff officers, an extra plane and pilot did have to be found for each of the staff formations. It took some time to work out these details, as the staffs were very small and contained no supernumerary flying personnel. A tactical manual by Hptm. Trautloft, who joined the staff of a fighter training school after his return from Spain, introduced the new procedures to the flying units.

DAYS OF PEACE

The peacetime routine of Jagdgeschwader 234 was similar to that of fighter units around the world—formation flying, simulated aerial combat, and firing on ground targets. Joint field exercises with the army became more frequent in the late 1930s, as it became apparent that Germany was fated to enter once again into offensive warfare. Aerial gunnery practice was a problem, as central Europe then, as now, was very crowded. A high point for the flying and ground crews of the Staffeln was the annual excursion to the Luftwaffe's North Sea training base on the island of Sylt, where the pilots could sate their aggressiveness with live firing on towed targets. "Buzz jobs," or low-altitude flights, were normally forbidden, but periodic "propaganda flights" were ordered for the purpose of impressing the local civilian population and, incidentally, the French. These flights were flown in close formation at the lowest possible altitude up the Rhine valley, from Cologne past Coblenz to Bingen. The pilots made the most of these opportunities to show off in their Heinkel and Arado biplanes, whose attractive light gray finishes were accented by garish orange trim. (From 1935 to 1937

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each Jagdgeschwader painted its biplane fighters' cowlings and fuselage top decking in a characteristic color—that of JG 234 was orange.) The arrival of the Bf 109s in their somber dark green warpaint brought this ostentatious identification scheme to an end. Geschwader and Staffel emblems were soon designed and painted on the aircraft, both as a means of identification and as a demonstration of unit pride.

Major Eduard Ritter von Schleich, a World War fighter pilot known to the Allies as the “Black Knight,” arrived in mid-1937 to take command of II/JG 234. Von Schleich was a Bavarian who had been knighted by Kaiser Wilhelm II after receiving Germany's highest World War I medal for heroism, the *Pour le Mérite*. He was well known for his chivalrous, courtly demeanor and proved a popular commander. His Gruppe soon moved to a newly constructed airfield near its previous home in Duesseldorf. I/JG 234 and II/JG 234 remained subordinated to JG 134 “Horst Wessel” until 1 November 1938, when the newly promoted Oberst von Schleich was named the first Kommodore of the Geschwader, which was redesignated that same day from JG 234 to JG 132. (The flying units of the prewar Luftwaffe were assigned and numbered on a geographic basis. Twice during this period the air districts were redrawn, resulting in a renumbering of the flying units.)

The original cadre of the Geschwader had played a key role in one of Hitler's first successful bluffs, the military reoccupation of the Rhineland. The local citizens, their pride in their nation and its armed forces restored, adopted the young servicemen as their own, inviting them to various civil ceremonies and parades and coming in large numbers to the numerous air shows put on for their benefit at the Cologne and Duesseldorf air bases. Eventually someone suggested that the fighter unit take the name of one of the local nationalist heroes. The suggestion was accepted with alacrity by the Luftwaffe High Command, and on 11 December 1938, with appropriate ceremony, the Geschwader officially became Jagdgeschwader 132 “Schlageter.”

ALBERT LEO SCHLAGETER

Albert Leo Schlageter was a native of Schoenau, in the Black Forest. Nineteen years old when the First World War began, he

enlisted in the artillery and soon was made an officer. After the Armistice, he marched his battery back in full military order to the Rhine River, where he dismissed his men. He then joined the Freikorps, a loosely organized group of paramilitary units, and in 1919 took part in the expulsion of the Bolsheviks from Riga, Lithuania. After more fighting, now against the Poles, he returned home to the Rhineland, where he soon took up arms again. His opponents this time were the French, who occupied the Rhineland while overseeing the payment of reparations under the terms of the Versailles treaty. These reparations included much of the Ruhr's coal production and industrial output and were in large part responsible for the terrible inflation that crippled Germany in the early 1920s. Schlageter was captured after blowing up a section of the Duisburg-Duesseldorf railroad track and was sentenced to death by a French military court. He was shot by a firing squad on 26 May 1923. His burial plot became a nationalist shrine. After the French troops were withdrawn, a large, slender, stainless steel cross was erected on the site, and ceremonies were held on each anniversary of his execution. The Nazis were quick to capitalize on this ready-made nationalist saga, but as Schlageter's Roman Catholicism was well known, they were unable to appropriate him totally into the Nazi canon. The Geschwader adopted as its emblem a gothic S in a shield; this was painted on each of the unit's aircraft in the period 1939-1941. Less well known is another version of the emblem, in which the S is superimposed on a slender Christian cross.

WAR LOOMS

Each member of the Geschwader was now entitled to wear a band inscribed "Jagdgeschwader Schlageter" around the right cuff of his service jacket. This mark of distinction was a real boost to morale. JG 132 was only the third fighter unit to be awarded such an honor title. One practical result of this distinction was that for propaganda, if not operational, reasons, the Schlageter unit was always among the first to receive new equipment. Re-equipment with Bf 109E-1s began in December 1938 and was complete by the end of January. This was the model of the Messerschmitt fighter in which the Schlageter pilots would shortly go to war.

The Bf 109E-1 was powered with the DB 601A, an 1100

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horsepower inverted-vee liquid cooled engine from Daimler-Benz. The new engine improved the fighter's performance dramatically—top speed was increased to 342 mph and service ceiling to 34,450 feet. The only fighter in the world able to challenge these figures was the Supermarine Spitfire, which was just beginning to enter service with the Royal Air Force. The only weakness of the E-1 apparent within the Luftwaffe was its armament, which was the same as that of the earlier variants. The four 7.9-mm machine guns had to be retained until new cannon designs could be perfected.

On 1 May 1939 all Luftwaffe flying units were renumbered for the second time. JG 132 became JG 26; its official designation was now Jagdgeschwader 26 "Schlageter." Oberst von Schleich continued to command the Geschwader from Duesseldorf. Major Handrick led the Cologne-based First Gruppe, while Hptm. Werner Palm, and later Hptm. Herwig Knueppel, ran the Second Gruppe from Duesseldorf.

The Geschwader's peacetime routine had but a few short months to continue. Tension in Europe mounted throughout the summer of 1939. On 25 August, I/JG 26 was ordered to move from Cologne to Odendorf, across the Rhine in the Eifel forest. At 0100 that same day, II/JG 26 received orders to relocate "inconspicuously" from Duesseldorf to Boeninghardt, west of the Rhine near the Dutch border, and to be operational in the new location by 1815. The start of the war on 1 September thus found the Geschwader "in the field"; its mission—the air defense of the Western frontier.

2 SITZKRIEG AND BLITZKRIEG

1 September 1939 –
26 June 1940

WAR BEGINS

ON THE 1ST OF SEPTEMBER 1939, HITLER UNLEASHED THE BLITZKRIEG on a half-comprehending world. The offensive components of the Luftwaffe were its Kampfgeschwader, Stukageschwader, and Zerstoerergeschwader (bomber, dive-bomber, and heavy fighter wings). These supported the army in its attack on Poland. A few Bf 109 units were used in Poland, but most were held back for defensive purposes. According to current Luftwaffe doctrine, single-engined fighters (that is, Bf 109s) were suitable for little more than point defense, while the twin-engined Bf 110 heavy fighters were capable of handling both bomber escort and air superiority missions. Jagdgeschwader 26 found itself stationed near its peacetime bases. Its stated mission was “to protect the industrial region and the western German border.” The expected RAF attacks never came, and the fighter pilots found themselves sitting in their cockpits on the ground, at Sitzbereitschaft (cockpit readiness), for hours on end. Their bases faced the neutral nations of Belgium and the Netherlands, and the eager pilots were somewhat jealous of their brethren farther south, who were better positioned to come to grips with the French and the British.

FORMATION OF THE THIRD GRUPPE

The Third Gruppe of the Geschwader was established at Werl on 23 September. Its first Kommandeur left the Geschwader

in November and was replaced by Hptm. Ernst Freiherr von Berg. The initial strength of the Gruppe was only one Staffel; initial equipment was a mixture of obsolete Ar 68s, Ar 66s, and Kl 35s, with a handful of Bf 109Cs. The Gruppe was rapidly expanded by the time-honored expedient of carving up established units. The 2nd Staffel contributed half of its pilots and ground staff to the new 7th Staffel; the 4th Staffel apparently moved almost in total to the new 8th Staffel; while the 9th Staffel received its cadre from a Zerstoerer unit, II/ZG 26. The Gruppe was brought up to strength in aircraft in October, with the receipt of thirty Bf 109E-1s. The Geschwader's organization was now the standard one of the period—three Gruppen, each with three Staffeln numbered in a single sequence. (That is, the First Gruppe contained the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Staffel; the Second Gruppe, the 4th, 5th, and 6th Staffel; the Third Gruppe, the 7th, 8th, and 9th Staffel.)

THE GESCHWADER'S FIRST VICTORY

On 28 September, Lt. Joseph "Jupp" Buerschgens, a 22-year-old career officer whose home was in nearby Duesseldorf, was ordered to escort a Henschel Hs 126 on a spotting mission over the Saar, far to the south of the Geschwader's usual patrol area. The 2nd Staffel pilot accompanied the reconnaissance plane as far as the border and prepared to turn back, in accordance with his orders. Just then he sighted eight French Curtiss Hawk 75As below him; beyond them were three more. They were above Germany, and thus fair game. Furthermore, they had spotted the slow Henschel and were circling for an attack. Buerschgens flipped his Messerschmitt into a quick split-S, burst past the eight circling fighters, and opened fire on the Curtiss closest to the Henschel. The French fighter shuddered and spun out, smoking. It was reported later to have crashed near Tuendorf, but Buerschgens was much too busy to watch it fall. He recovered from his power dive at 6,500 feet and zoomed to regain altitude and a position to attack the other fighters. He broke up an attack on the Henschel, which was able to make its escape after taking only seven hits.

Buerschgens now faced odds of one to ten. He utilized his Messerschmitt's superiority in vertical maneuvering to stay out of range, almost ramming one plane. His aircraft was then struck

several times by French fire. His throttle was shot from his hand; his radiator was holed and began to leak; bullets from behind him hissed past his head and into his instrument panel. A bullet then slammed into his right shoulder. In severe pain, Buerschgens leaned forward, pressed the stick against his body with his left hand, and dove away. He made his escape and sought to find a place to land, his visibility to the right obscured by spurting blood. He sighted a meadow in front of him, a small stream, and beyond these a German wire entanglement. He bellied his plane in smoothly; the barbed wire brought it to a halt. Buerschgens had landed in a minefield in front of the German West Wall defenses, and an army patrol had to be sent out to rescue him. His smashed shoulder required eight months to heal. While in the hospital, Jupp Buerschgens, the first pilot of the Geschwader to score an air victory, was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class.

10(NACHT)/JG 26 AND THE BATTLE OF THE HELGOLAND BIGHT

The offensive-minded Luftwaffe High Command paid very little attention to air defense in the prewar years. Night fighting was neglected almost entirely. In early September 1939, a number of night fighter Staffeln were hurriedly organized, and equipped with obsolete day fighters. Tactical doctrine was rudimentary; their mission was described as “flak support.” One of these units was 10(Nacht)/JG 26. Its commander was Oblt. Johannes Steinhoff, who transferred in from the demonstration unit 1(Nachtjagd)/LG 1. The parent Geschwader, JG 26, contributed only a few pilots. For two months, the Staffel flew evening and dawn patrols from Bonn-Hangelar in obsolescent Bf 109Cs, entirely without result.

The Sitzkrieg or “Sitting War,” the “Phony War” to the Allies in the west, was fought in the air under a peculiar set of gentlemen’s rules. Neither side wished to be the first to hit civilians, and thus provoke the other to reprisals. The night bombers of the RAF flew small-scale leaflet raids over Germany, while the RAF’s day bombers were restricted to naval targets. The earliest RAF raids on ships at the Wilhelmshaven naval base met with some success, and the Germans beefed up their defenses. One Staffel that was moved

north to the area of the seaports was 10(Nacht)/JG 26, its night duties temporarily abandoned.

By mid-December, Wilhelmshaven was protected by two of the Wehrmacht's first radar units and by about one hundred Bf 109s and Bf 110s, all under the command of Obstlt. Carl Schumacher, Kommodore of JG 1. On 18 December, the staff of RAF Bomber Command scheduled a raid on warships believed to be berthed in the port, despite forecasts of crystal-clear weather. About thirty Wellington bombers took off at two-minute intervals starting at 0930 hours and after forming up headed across the North Sea. The bombers made landfall near the Danish-German border at 1230 and turned south toward Wilhelmshaven. Their planned course kept them within range of the German coastal defenses for an hour and a half. The stage was set for a massacre.

Both German radar sets were in working order, and both picked up the British formation some twenty minutes from Wilhelmshaven. The news was initially disregarded at JG 1 headquarters—"seagulls" was one reason suggested for the radar plot—and it took the full twenty minutes for the news to register "officially"; by then the bombers were passing overhead. In the interim, the frantic Luftwaffe radar officer had called the airfields directly. Only Oblt. Steinhoff's six Bf 109Cs were airborne and in a position to intercept the Wellingtons before they reached Wilhelmshaven.

Steinhoff's pilots had been well briefed on the defenses of the Wellington. It had an effective rear turret containing two .303-inch machine guns and adequate frontal armament, but it was defenseless from the beam or below. As ordered, the Messerschmitts made beam approaches, which required difficult deflection aiming. Steinhoff had to make two beam attacks on his target before the bomber burst into flames and fell inverted into the sea. His pilots fired off all their ammunition and claimed five more Wellingtons. The remaining bombers closed up their formation and passed over the docks without releasing their bombs. The ships were too close to land to be bombed, according to their orders.

By now, two more German fighter formations had closed on the struggling bombers, and the one-sided battle continued. When the last fighter turned back, ten bombers had crashed at sea or force-landed on shore. Two more ditched in the North Sea, and another three were destroyed in forced landings back in England.

Schumacher's pilots filed a total of thirty-four victory claims, of which twenty-six were ultimately allowed; this was almost double the actual RAF losses. The RAF claimed to have downed a dozen German fighters, while actual losses were two Bf 109s.

The German victory was not nearly as complete as it could have been. Ground control, as mentioned, was poor, and there were also problems in the air. Many attacks were not pressed to a sufficiently close range. And many fighters were damaged by the bombers' rear gunners, an indication that orders to concentrate on beam attacks had been ignored. For its part, RAF Bomber Command put as good a face on its defeat as possible, blaming it on "poor air discipline." But the British survivors knew better; news spread quickly through the still-small bomber force, and the "unofficial" word ultimately prevailed—unescorted daylight bombing raids into the heart of the German defenses were suicidal.

THE WINTER DOLDRUMS

Before the year's end, Steinhoff's 10(Nacht)/JG 26 was absorbed in a specialist night fighter Gruppe, IV(Nacht)/JG 2, leaving JG 26 and thus this history. For the Geschwader's three Gruppen of day fighters, the boring routine of standing patrols and cockpit readiness continued throughout the winter. The ground crews' monotony was broken by orders to repaint the fuselages of their Messerschmitts from dark green splinter camouflage to pale blue, appropriate to the conditions of air and ground superiority visualized by the Wehrmacht for the coming spring campaign. The first Bf 103E-3s, which were merely E-1s with increased armament, were taken on charge by the Geschwader. The two wing-mounted machine guns of the E-1 were replaced by 20-mm MG/FF cannon. Messerschmitt planned to equip the new fighter with a third 20-mm cannon, mounted between the engine cylinder banks and firing through the propeller hub. But trials revealed that the new cannon's vibrations damaged the fighter's light structure, and in fact no Bf 109E saw operational service carrying an engine cannon.

The Geschwader's pilots, all of them professional military men, were anxious to see combat. The Jagdgeschwader facing the French border were building fine records. JG 53 was especially active; Hptm. Werner Moelders of that unit scored ten personal victories

during the Sitzkrieg. The Schlageter fighters' record was, in comparison, mediocre. After Buerschgens's combat, only one additional victory was scored by the Geschwader during the Sitzkrieg. It was obtained on 7 November by Lt. Joachim Muencheberg, adjutant of the Third Gruppe, who shot an RAF Blenheim light bomber into the Rhine River near Opladen.

On 9 December, Oberst von Schleich was relieved of the command of the Geschwader, in line with a policy calling for the removal of all World War I veterans from flying posts. While personally disappointing to von Schleich, the change made sense, not only from a physiological standpoint, but because the Luftwaffe suffered, then and always, from a serious lack of experienced officers for upper-level staff positions and ground commands. The Black Knight of the First World War went on to hold a number of responsible commands during the Second, ultimately reaching the rank of Generalleutnant and the position of commander of the Luftwaffe ground organization in Norway. The energetic, courtly von Schleich had imprinted the Schlageter Geschwader with his own self-confident professionalism and had served as a valuable role model for the unit's young pilots.

The new Geschwaderkommodore was Major Hugo Witt, whose military service dated back to the earliest days of the Reichswehr immediately after World War I. His career had been varied—he had suffered severe facial burns in the crash of the dirigible *Hindenburg*—and largely successful, but at age 39 his days as a combat commander were numbered. Sure enough, he was to be relieved on 24 June 1940, two days after the conclusion of the French campaign.

Luftwaffe organization during this period was still somewhat fluid. New Geschwader were being formed from formerly independent Gruppen, and other Gruppen were traded back and forth. A Jagdgeschwader had the staff to administer and to control three Gruppen; it was apparently not immediately obvious that it was more efficient to administer and control the *same* three Gruppen. I/JG 26 moved to Boeninghardt in February and was there subordinated to JG 51, although it was still treated administratively as part of its home Geschwader. The Gruppe remained under the tactical control of another Geschwader for most of the French campaign. To further complicate matters, JG 26 picked up as its third Gruppe

a succession of Jagdgruppen from other Geschwader. As they are of only tangential interest, and as documentation of their activities is poor, these attached Gruppen will be mentioned again only in passing. Fortunately for the historian, Gruppe-swapping as a routine policy ended with the conclusion of the French campaign in June.

THE BLITZKRIEG STRIKES WEST

As the bitter winter of 1939–1940 ended, the impatient pilots of JG 26 awaited the inevitable spring campaign with optimism. They believed their mount, the Bf 109E-3, to be the best single-engined fighter in the world. Mock dogfights that winter with the Bf 110s of ZG 26 “Horst Wessel” had further increased their confidence. The Bf 109 had proved to be a far better fighter than the twin-engined Bf 110.

An objective assessment of JG 26’s likely opponents shows the pilots’ self-assurance to have been well founded. The Bf 109E-3 was a proven fighter with an armament of two cannon and two machine guns, a top speed of 350 mph at 19,500 feet, and a service ceiling of 34,500 feet. No continental aircraft in front-line service offered comparable performance. The only equally matched opponent appeared to be the British Supermarine Spitfire, as yet an unknown quantity. No Spitfires were based in France; the only RAF fighters on the continent were a few obsolete Gloster Gladiators and Hawker Hurricanes, the RAF’s most numerous fighter. The Hurricane model in France was armed with eight light machine guns; it had a top speed of 310 mph at 18,000 feet and a service ceiling of 33,400 feet.

Of the Germans’ West European opponents, the Dutch had a well-organized air force featuring modern indigenous designs by the firm of Anthony Fokker, but their planes were pitifully few in numbers. The Belgian Air Force could be dismissed out of hand as small and ill-equipped. What of the French? Wracked by the disruptions of nationalization, the modernization of their large air force lagged far behind schedule. Alone of the new French designs, the Dewoitine D 520 was the equal on paper to the Messerschmitt, with an armament of one cannon and two machine guns and a top speed of 334 mph. However, only one *Groupe de Chasse* was operational with the fighter. Another new fighter, the Bloch MB 152, was proving to be

a failure in service; most were grounded for various defects. The Bloch had a top speed of only 288 mph. The most numerous French fighter was the Morane Saulnier MS 406, an obsolescent design with a top speed of 304 mph. The most successful French fighter in the coming campaign was of American design and manufacture—the Curtiss Hawk 75A. This handy and robust aircraft had an armament of four machine guns and a top speed of 313 mph.

There is little information available concerning Jagdgeschwader 26's activities during the six-week campaign that resulted in the conquest of France and the Low Countries. Nevertheless, enough data can be pieced together to give a flavor of the activities of the Schlageter fighters during those spring days of long ago. The Stab and the three Gruppen of the Geschwader began the campaign from bases in their home territory of the Rhineland. They were administered by Oberst von Doering's Jagdfliegerfuehrer 2 (Fighter Command 2, abbreviated Jafue 2), which was a component of Genobst. Kesselring's Luftflotte 2. Kesselring's forces supported Genobst. von Bock's Army Group B, which was to attack the Low Countries frontally and draw the British and mobile French forces forward into Belgium, while Genobst. von Rundstedt's Army Group A cut through the "impenetrable" Ardennes forests of southern Belgium and Luxembourg, outflanking the Maginot Line, which ran along the French-German border, and splitting the Allied forces. Jafue 2 contained four Geschwader—JG 3, JG 26, JG 51, and ZG 26. Jagdgeschwader 26, with its own Second and Third Gruppen and the Third Gruppe of JG 3 under command, operated over the Netherlands for the first few days of the campaign, as did I/JG 26, which was attached to JG 51.

The primary mission of the Geschwader on the first morning of the campaign was to sweep across Fortress Holland in advance of Ju 52 transports, which were loaded with paratroopers and air-landing troops. The surviving fighter pilots recall racing across the polders in the gray dawn, light antiaircraft and small-arms tracers arcing ineffectively behind them. Five Dutch aircraft were shot down by the Schlageter fighters, and the Junkers transports' first missions were carried out without hindrance from the air.

Once the Germans had landed, however, they found themselves engaged in fierce combat. The Dutch had not been taken by surprise and fought back bravely. The airfields around Rotterdam and

the Hague were soon littered with smashed Luftwaffe transports, and by noon the situation was very much in doubt. In an attempt to clear the "fog of war," Lt. Wolfgang Ludewig of 9/JG 26 was ordered to land near the Hague and ascertain the positions of an infantry division that had landed on several fields in the area that morning. Ludewig was hit by ground fire in his first attempt to land at Ypenburg. After another attempt, and still more damage, he was forced to land in the dunes outside the field. He reported to Gen. von Sponeck, as ordered, but was then unable to take off. Ludewig remained grounded for the duration of the brief Dutch campaign. He finally returned to his unit on 18 May, bearing a commendation from von Sponeck attesting to his skills as an infantryman. Since Ludewig had been carried as missing for several days, a casualty report detailing the entire episode was filed after his return. The report, unique in its dry humor, may still be found in the official files.

By the end of 11 May, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the French Seventh Army had advanced halfway across Belgium and taken up their previously planned (but not fortified) positions along the Meuse and Dyle rivers. Air cover was to be provided by *Groupement 25* of the French Air Force, which contained only twenty-eight MS 406s of GC III/1 and twenty MB 152s of GC II/8, plus the four Hurricane squadrons of the Air Component of the BEF. This small force was reinforced from the Paris area by some of GC III/3's Moranes and from England by three additional Hurricane squadrons. In addition, the Curtiss Hawk 75As of GC I/4 moved forward to Antwerp. According to most sources, this latter unit belonged to *Groupement 23*, whose mission was to cover the French armies holding the hinge point of the Allied advance at the France-Luxembourg border. The transfer of one of the best French fighter units away from the Ardennes area, just as von Rundstedt's forces were advancing into it, is evidence of the skill of the Germans' deception.

It was GC I/4 that confronted JG 26 on 11 May, in the Geschwader's first major air battles of the war. The *Groupe* began the day with twenty-six aircraft. Its Hawks were hit over Antwerp by the Messerschmitts of the Third Gruppe at 1745, and again by the Second Gruppe at 1910. The German pilots claimed six victories, while suffering no casualties. The French claimed three certain victories and one probable victory over the Bf 109s but lost their

commander and one enlisted pilot killed, and two other pilots wounded. In addition, many of the Hawks suffered serious damage from the Messerschmitts' cannon fire.

On the same day, fighters of 2/JG 26 encountered MS 406s from GC III/1 or GC III/3 in the Antwerp area. The Staffel destroyed one of the Moranes, but JG 26 suffered its first combat loss of the war, when Fw. Gerhard Herzog was shot down. Herzog fell into the hands of the BEF, was spirited across the Channel, and spent the rest of the war in Canada.

The favorite mission of the Jagdwaffe was the freie Jagd, or free hunt, which was simply a fighter sweep without escort responsibilities. It was an ideal task for the aggressive young pilots, especially in a fluid offensive campaign and under conditions of qualitative and quantitative superiority. Their other major assignment was the Jagdschutz, which translates as "fighter protection." At this stage of the war, this was little more than a patrol of a specified area of the front, protection being offered to any friendly bombers or reconnaissance aircraft encountered. In truth, these were the only two missions for which the Jagdgeschwader of the period were suited—they lacked the training, doctrine, and equipment for close escort, tactical reconnaissance, or ground attack. The task of bomber escort was reserved for Goering's elite twin-engined fighters, the Bf 110s of the Zerstoerergeschwader.

The freie Jagden flown on 12 May failed to make contact with the enemy. On 13 May, the Geschwader began a series of base movements. The Stab and Third Gruppe, and the attached III/JG 3, moved forward to Muenchen-Gladbach near the Dutch border, while the Second Gruppe moved to Uerdingen, also nearer the front. Meanwhile, von Bock continued his steady push through northern Belgium, while von Rundstedt's armor spearheads reached the Meuse River, around Sedan, almost unnoticed. Von Bock's forces played their diversionary role well, advancing in such strength that all available Allied air forces were drawn to oppose them. Among the new units thrown into the battle were several squadrons from RAF Fighter Command's No. 11 Group. The newest British day fighters, the Spitfire and the Defiant, had up until now been withheld from the Continent. However, on this day both saw combat over Holland—against JG 26.

Early in the morning, the six Defiants of "B" Flight, No. 264

Squadron, took off from Horsham St. Faith in easternmost England to patrol the Dutch coast. Defiants were turreted, two-man fighters with no forward-firing armament. They were given top cover by the six Spitfires of "A" flight, No. 66 Squadron. The Allied fighter pilots spotted a number of Ju 87Bs dive bombing a railroad line and attacked them successfully—ten victory credits were awarded for downed Stukas. The British fighters were then hit by the Messerschmitts of 5/JG 26. The Spitfires were successful in avoiding combat, except for one that force-landed in Belgium with combat damage. The Defiants, far slower than the German fighters, were unable to evade them and suffered severely. Five of the six were shot down. The Staffel claimed victories over seven Spitfires and one Defiant, while the true British losses were one Spitfire and five Defiants.

No. 264 Squadron's Defiants shot down one Bf 109E, that of Lt. Karl Borris. Borris, a member of JG 26 from December 1939 to V-E Day, kept a personal diary in addition to his logbook. He used his notes to compose the following account of this mission:

The telephone shrills—orders from the Kommodore. The 5th Staffel is to take off immediately for a Jagdschutz mission in the area around Dordrecht. We hurry to our machines, take off, and roar westward. It is shortly after 0600. Clouds appear at about 2,500 meters [8,000 feet]; it is somewhat hazy. Below us lies the mouth of the Rhine. We are south of Dordrecht. Suddenly someone cries on the radio, "Aircraft right! Achtung, Spitfires!" Enemy contact with a mixed British formation . . . I bank toward a Defiant. I can clearly see the four machine guns in its turret firing; however, I do not think they can track me in a dogfight. I approach closer, and open fire at about seventy meters range. At this moment, something hits my aircraft, hard. I immediately pull up into the clouds and examine the damage. The left side of my instrument panel is shot through; a round has penetrated the Revi [reflector gunsight]; and a fuel line has obviously been hit—the cockpit is swimming in gasoline. The engine coughs and quits, starved of fuel. I push a wing over and drop from the clouds. Unbuckle, canopy off, out! I must first pull myself up against a strong headwind. I finally get out, at an altitude of about 800 meters [2,600 feet] . . . I turn a few somersaults, find the handle, and open my parachute. . . . A light northeast wind blows me toward the mouth of the Rhine. I sideslip with all my strength and land on the outermost dike wall of the last polder of the delta.

After landing all alone in a barren, deserted no-man's-land, Borris finally made it back to his home Staffel on 17 May. Fighter Command did not again send its precious Spitfires or painfully vulnerable Defiants over Holland. The former were needed at home, if the British Isles were to be defended; the crews of the latter had to be given time to devise new tactics, if they were to survive the coming battles.

The Dutch Air Force flew one of its last sorties early on the 13th. The last operational Fokker T-V medium bomber took off from Schipol at 0519 to bomb the Moerdijk bridge, escorted by two Fokker G-1 twin-boomed fighters. The bomber made two runs on the bridge at low altitude but failed to damage it. The three aircraft attempted return to Schipol at minimum altitude—in the words of the Dutch, at “*huisje-boompje-beestje*,” or house-tree-animal level. The small formation was hit by 4/JG 26 near Dordrecht, and the T-V and one G-1 were shot down in flames by the 4th's Kapitaen, Oblt. Karl Ebbighausen. The sole remaining G-1 landed at Schipol at 0559.

The First Gruppe was also active on the 13th. Around eighteen Bf 109s from this unit, probably two Staffeln, attacked six MS 406s of GC III/3 over Breda in the Netherlands. The French fighters had just intercepted a German medium bomber formation out of the cover of a rain squall. Lt. Eberhard Henrici of 1/JG 26 shot down one Morane, whose pilot was able to make a forced landing and reach the French lines. The commander of the French formation fought a prolonged, lone battle before ramming a Messerschmitt and crashing to his own death. The German victim was probably Uffz. Hermann Speck, JG 26's first combat fatality. Another 1st Staffel pilot was shot down in this engagement, but survived with wounds.

BREAKTHROUGH ON THE MEUSE

The next day, 14 May, saw the German victory secured. The Allies, finally alerted to their peril, attacked the German bridge-heads across the Meuse River with all available air forces. The Jagdgeschwader of von Massow's Jafue 3 flew 814 interception sorties, claiming eighty-nine Allied aircraft downed. By day's end, the British and French bomber squadrons had been decimated. Since

all of the mobile Allied units were far to the north in Belgium, and the French had neglected to maintain a strategic reserve, the Germans could continue pouring their armor across the Meuse and on to the Channel coast, virtually unimpeded by air or ground attacks against their flanks. The Allied units to the north were heavily engaged by Army Group B and could not turn to face the new threat at their rear. The Germans had sprung their trap, and the best of the Allied formations were caught in it.

The Schlageter fighters did not benefit from the good hunting to their south. On this day, JG 26 was supporting von Bock's own attempt at a breakthrough, in the Gembloux gap between the Dyle and Meuse river lines. The 14th also brought the capitulation of the Netherlands, which permitted the Luftwaffe units still engaged in that nation, including I/JG 26, to join the main battle.

On 16 May, JG 26 saw combat over France for the first time. Over the next two days, the Geschwaderstab and the Second and Third Gruppen, with the attached III/JG 3, moved their bases forward into eastern Belgium. The 18th found them supporting von Rundstedt's panzers in their race to the Channel. The armor, part of von Kleist's Panzer Group, was cutting diagonally across von Bock's front; boundary lines on the ground or in the air meant little.

The Second Gruppe was credited with shooting down twelve Allied fighters in the Douai-Cambrai area between 1615 and 1630 that afternoon—ten MS 406s, one Hawk 75A, and one Hurricane. The Allied units have not been determined; the situation had grown so chaotic that any of a number of units could have been involved. Only one JG 26 Messerschmitt was shot down on the 18th, and its pilot was freed from the French three days later.

May 19th brought a continuation of the previous day's fighting over the front. The Second Gruppe claimed three victories, but suffered a serious loss—the unit's Kommandeur, Hptm. Herwig Knueppel, one of the original "Spaniards," and with three recent victories the most successful JG 26 unit leader, did not return that evening from a combat with fighters over Lille. He was carried as missing for two days, until his body was found. Oblt. Karl Ebbighausen, Kapitaen of 4/JG 26 and another successful air fighter, was named Knueppel's temporary replacement.

The next week brought a diminution in the air fighting but no rest for the weary ground staffs. All of the Geschwader's component

units moved yet again—I/JG 26 to Antwerp, and the rest of the Geschwader to fields in far western Belgium. The British Expeditionary Force succeeded in reaching Dunkirk, its one remaining port, in good order, and began establishing a defensive perimeter, while the Royal Navy completed its hurried plans for the now inevitable evacuation. Fighter Command was instructed to provide as much protection as possible to the beleaguered infantry without jeopardizing its ability to defend the home island. Over the next few days, single RAF fighter squadrons were ordered to sweep the coast from Boulogne to Ostend. Massive dogfights on the 24th and the 27th resulted in ten victory claims by the Schlageter pilots, against no losses. Because the German fighters typically flew in Gruppe formations of forty aircraft, they invariably outnumbered the British when the two sides met. The RAF, whose largest tactical unit contained only a dozen fighters, was slow to counter with larger formations.

THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION

The first day of the evacuation, 28 May, found all of the Geschwader's constituent Gruppen active over Dunkirk. In a violent battle with sixteen fighters, pilots of the First Gruppe claimed six Spitfires shot down; one German pilot was killed. The Second Gruppe claimed two Spitfires and one Hurricane shot down over the Channel, while the Third Gruppe claimed six Hurricanes over Ostend.

Although these early battles with Spitfires had apparently ended in the Luftwaffe's favor, the German fighter pilots soon came to realize that their new opponent's capabilities were a match for those of their Messerschmitts. They gained the impression that the Spitfire had a higher ceiling than the Bf 109 and was more maneuverable at all speeds and altitudes. The better German pilots had already learned to fight Hurricanes in the vertical plane, using dive-and-zoom tactics; turning battles were to be avoided whenever possible. These tactics were even more important against Spitfires. The favorite German escape maneuver (for the next three years) was the split-S, a half-roll followed by a dive. A less popular tactic because of its effect on the pilot, but one which guaranteed a successful escape if started with sufficient altitude, was a steep pitch forward

into a dive straight ahead. This maneuver drew negative gravity, which caused the carburetors of the RAF fighters' Merlin engines to cut out momentarily. The Bf 109E's DB 601A engine received fuel by direct injection, whatever its orientation; thus the German fighter could always gain distance on a pursuing Spitfire or Hurricane by diving straight ahead.

The dawn of 29 May was cloudy and overcast. There was no appreciable air activity over the beachhead until afternoon; the combats then gradually increased in scale and intensity. At 1840 an RAF formation consisting of four Spitfire and Hurricane squadrons arrived to take over the cover patrol. The two Hurricane squadrons were at 10,000 feet, while the Spitfires flew at 25,000 feet—too far apart for effective support. Worse, intersquadron communications were limited in Fighter Command to visual signals; there were no common radio frequencies among squadrons. The Hurricanes were hit from the clouds by a large force of Bf 109s—III/JG 26, possibly supplemented by III/JG 3. Before the Spitfires could intervene, they too were struck by a superior number of Messerschmitts—Hptm. Ebbighausen's II/JG 26. During the next half hour, ten British fighters went down; four Spitfires were claimed by II/JG 26, while six Hurricanes and Spitfires were credited to III/JG 26. The scattered British fighters made their way back to England as best they could, having lost one-quarter of their number. While the British fighters were engaged, the German Stukas made their most effective attack of the week on the destroyers and transports of the evacuation force, entirely unhindered by the RAF. The Schlagerter Geschwader's success was won without loss, although the four RAF squadrons involved were credited with the destruction of fifteen Bf 109s.

The weather prevented any air operations on the 30th. The evacuation proceeded under cover of a thick fog bank. All three JG 26 Gruppen saw combat on the following day. The First Gruppe claimed one Spitfire, but lost two pilots; the Second Gruppe claimed one Hurricane without loss. The day's major successes belonged to the Third Gruppe. The mid-afternoon Fighter Command patrol comprised one squadron each of Spitfires, Hurricanes, and Defiants. At 1520, the Defiant crews saw a large formation of He 111s and turned toward it. As the bombers fled, the British fighters were hit by an estimated "seventy" Bf 109s, diving from the sun. This German unit is unknown; it might have been III/JG 3. The Defiants

entered a defensive circle; the Messerschmitts downed one of them, and two of the Defiants then collided and crashed. The Hurricane squadron, No. 213, was heavily engaged by III/JG 26. The Gruppe shot down five Hurricanes and filed nine victory claims; the Hurricane pilots shot down two Third Gruppe aircraft, while claiming six. Lt. Joachim Muencheberg, the Third Gruppe adjutant, scored an unprecedented four victories on the 31st.

On 1 June, the Geschwader suffered five casualties, which was its largest daily total to date. Two pilots were killed, two were injured, and one was shot down behind the French lines and captured, to be released after the Armistice. Two Geschwader pilots bailed out of their Messerschmitts during the day without injury. All morning the Luftwaffe mounted heavy attacks on the beachhead and offshore shipping. At noon, the Second Gruppe took off from Chievres on a defensive sweep. They arrived over Dunkirk in time to engage a formation of Hurricanes which was approaching some Do 17s. The RAF unit was one of three Hurricane squadrons in a patrolling "wing"; all three squadrons were soon caught up in the whirling melee, which resulted in the loss of five British aircraft. The pilots of the Second Gruppe claimed six Hurricanes and one Spitfire in this battle, but only three of their claims were confirmed—an indication of the scale and severity of the combats. The Gruppe was probably the only Bf 109 unit engaged. It suffered only three losses, although the Hurricane pilots were credited with thirteen Bf 109s. Fighter Command's victory claims for the week of Dunkirk exceeded actual Luftwaffe losses by a factor of about four to one.

The JG 26 Geschwaderstab was conspicuously unsuccessful in aerial combat during the Western campaign. The number of staff officers was small, and a choice had to be made between administrative duties and combat flying. Kommodore Witt opted for the paperwork and flew very few missions. Hptm. Viktor "Pappi" Causin, the popular executive officer and a former brewer, did not fly. The other two officers, Oblt. Horten (technical officer) and Oblt. Hasselmann (adjutant), seethed in frustration. They were permitted to fly but a single mission over Dunkirk, during which dust and smoke severely restricted visibility below 10,000 feet. A dip beneath the haze revealed a scene of total chaos—the beaches were black with men and equipment; the sea was roiled by drunken ships

heeling to and fro. No British aircraft could be seen. Since the fighters of JG 26 were not permitted to attack ground targets, Horten and Hasselmann returned to base.

On the 2nd, the Second Gruppe again saw hard combat. Early that morning, Hptm. Erich Noack had arrived at Chievres from a training command to take over the Gruppe. The unit reached Dunkirk at 0900, in time to join some Bf 110s in a massive battle with four RAF fighter squadrons that had succeeded in reaching an He 111 formation. The Gruppe claimed six British fighters, without loss. The evacuation continued unabated throughout the day. By nightfall, 338,226 Allied troops had reached England, and the beaches were empty of living men. Goering had failed utterly to fulfill his boast of destroying the British army from the air. However, in the excitement of the campaign, the men of the Luftwaffe had no sense of defeat; for the fighter pilots, especially, the week had been one of apparent great success.

OPERATION PAULA—THE AIR ATTACK ON PARIS

While the Dunkirk evacuation was still under way, Goering's attention turned elsewhere. On 3 June, Paris was bombed for the first time. Three hundred bombers of Luftflotten 2 and 3, under heavy fighter escort, attacked airfields in the Paris region. The French had maintained a large fighter reserve for just such an eventuality, but their defense proved surprisingly ineffective. The Schlageter Geschwader's Stab, First, and Second Gruppe took part in the raid. Major Witt led the Stabsschwarm on the mission, but had no "fighter's luck," to use the pilots' ironic term; he failed to sight a single enemy plane. The First Gruppe claimed two French fighters, while the Second claimed one, for the temporary loss of one pilot released by the French after the Armistice.

After the elimination of the Dunkirk perimeter on 4 June, the entire Geschwader moved to fields in the Calais area. Air battles over the Channel coast cost the Geschwader six pilots during the next week, but claims comfortably exceeded losses. On 6 June, Hptm. Adolf Galland arrived to take over the command of III/JG 26 from Major Ernst Freiherr von Berg, who left the Geschwader. Von Berg, a cavalry officer, had proven to be an ineffective combat leader, as well as a poor pilot—he was nicknamed the "propeller

killer." Galland had gained twelve victories since April, while serving as the adjutant of JG 27. This was a fair indication of the performance to be expected from the dynamic young career officer, now that he had at last obtained a genuine combat command in a fighter unit.

On 8 June, a 7th Staffel Schwarm was attacked by Hurricanes while in the vicinity of the fluid front lines. Lt. Klaus Mietusch was forced to set his damaged aircraft down in enemy territory. He landed without injury, but a French civilian then shot him in the buttocks with a boar rifle. After Mietusch's repatriation, he had to be sent to Germany for treatment. According to his friend Jupp Buerschgens, this episode affected Mietusch profoundly; after returning to his Staffel, Mietusch flew for a while as Lt. Buerschgens's wingman while he regained his touch and taste for combat.

Buerschgens himself missed most of the French campaign. While recovering from his September 1939 injury, he served as an ordnance officer in Muenster. When he returned to JG 26, he was assigned to the 7th Staffel, where most of his friends from the 2nd Staffel had been transferred upon formation of the Third Gruppe. Jupp Buerschgens's first victory of the campaign came on 9 June. In his words:

That afternoon we were ordered to fly a freie Jagd to Paris from our base at Capelle, north of the Seine. As we approached Paris we sighted two squadrons of enemy fighters climbing up from the city. We attacked them from above. I fastened on to the tail of one fighter, which vanished into the general air battle with a split-S. I immediately climbed away into a heavy layer of haze, which lay at about 3,000 meters [10,000 feet] and had clear skies above and below it. Flying at the upper border of the layer, I would pop out, look around for an opponent, and disappear again into the protective cloud. One time when I emerged I saw in front of me an aircraft doing just as I was—popping out, looking around, and dropping from sight again. I saw roundels, and carefully approached the enemy plane, remaining in the cloud until I had reached optimum firing distance. I opened fire with all my weapons. I saw strikes in the cockpit and on the fuselage. The enemy aircraft reared up sharply, and came past me in a flat left curve, almost at my altitude. I could see that the pilot had been hit. He was slumped forward. The machine banked more steeply, and dove over a wing. I saw it crash in a heavily populated

area west of Paris. I followed the plane until I was almost on the ground, dismayed and perplexed by what I had done.

In previous air battles I had always seen only the aircraft, not the men who were flying them. This time, I saw the man whom I had killed. He could just as easily have found himself behind me. I needed much longer than normal to find my airfield. My wingman landed long before me in a well-shot-up Bf 109. He had had better luck than my French opponent.

THE END OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Wehrmacht continued its inexorable advance southward through France. JG 26 moved twice more, finally basing at Villacoublay, a large permanent airfield outside Paris. The French Air Force was hard to find. Those of its aircraft with sufficient range were flying to North Africa. II/JG 26 was awarded the honor of flying cover patrols over the armistice negotiations at Compiegne. The RAF, however, failed to put in an appearance. The Armistice was signed on 22 June. JG 26 began to move back to its permanent stations in Germany, where it was finally reunited with its First Gruppe. On 24 June, the command of the Geschwader was given to Major Gotthardt Handrick, who passed his First Gruppe to Hptm. Kurt Fischer. Major Witt's departure was sweetened by his promotion on 1 July to Oberstleutnant. He became operations officer at Jafue 2 in Le Touquet, and later in the war he held various staff positions in Africa, Norway, Silesia, and Italy.

Jagdgeschwader 26 had made a solid record for itself in the brief campaign, claiming 160 victories against seventeen of its own pilots killed in action, two lost in flying accidents, three captured by the British, and about one dozen injured. The First Gruppe claimed twenty-four victories, the Second, sixty-six, and the Third, sixty-nine. The Geschwader's score for the war to date did not approach that of the current leader, JG 53, which claimed 275 victories, but JG 26 had one of the best records during the six-week Western campaign. It spent the following month absorbing new equipment and training new pilots. The unit's battle-seasoned veterans looked forward with confidence to their next round against the RAF.