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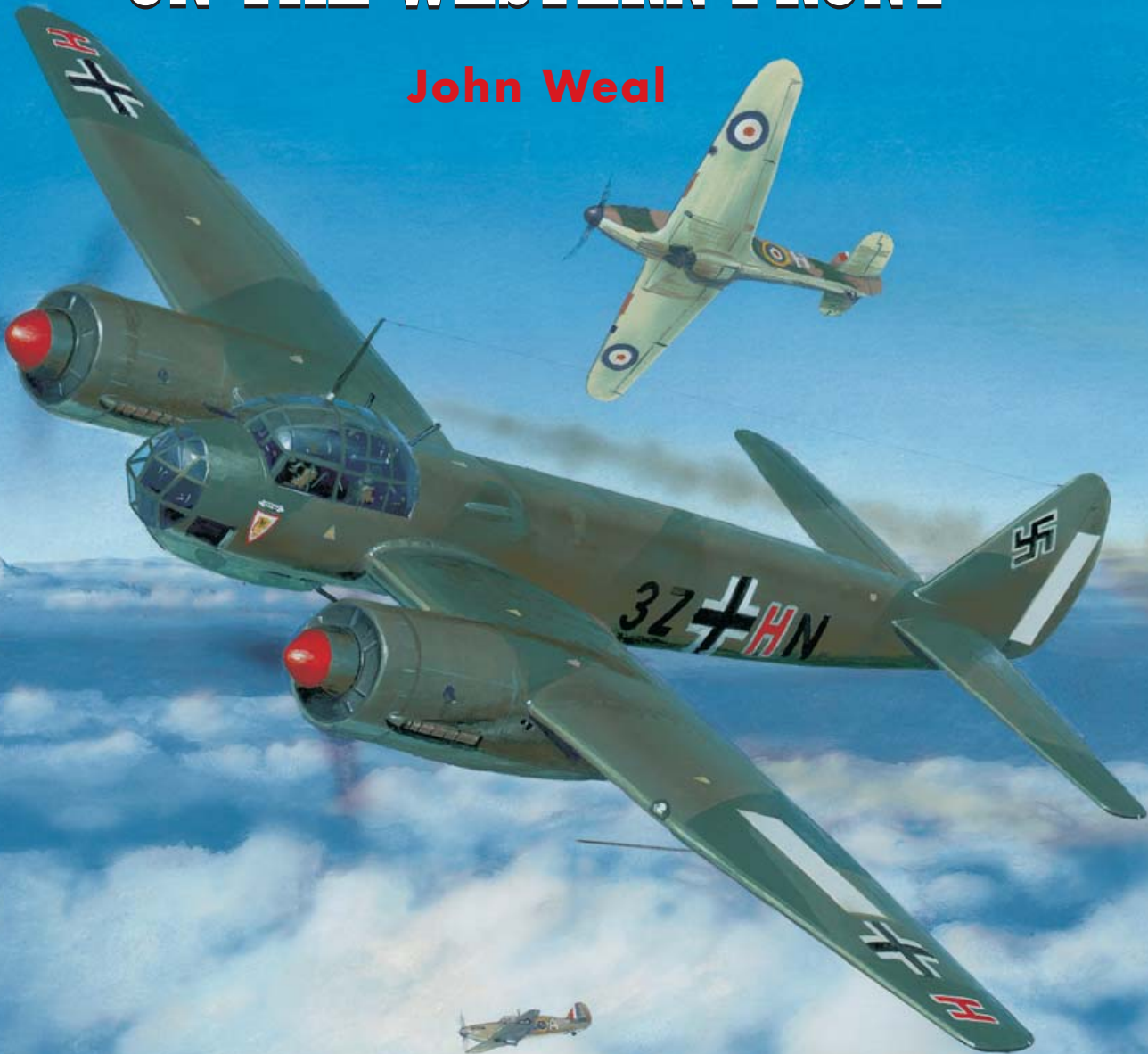


Ju 88

KAMPFGESCHWADER

ON THE WESTERN FRONT

John Weal



Iain Whyte



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1939-40 – THE WUNDERBOMBER YEARS

‘You still owe me an aircraft carrier!’ the Reichsmarschall boomed, only half-jokingly, as he caught sight of the familiar, white-overalled figure of Carl Francke.

The Luftwaffe Commander-in-Chief was making one of his periodic tours of inspection of the Rechlin test centre to watch the latest designs of the German aircraft industry being put through their paces. Francke, a leading test pilot at the Rechlin establishment, smiled his appreciation at his superior’s heavy-handed witticism. If truth be told, however, he was heartily sick of such remarks. After all, he had never claimed to have sunk the *Ark Royal*.

It was the Propaganda Ministry which had elevated his near miss into an outright sinking. But Francke was not about to sour Göring’s present mood of joviality by trying to convince him of the true facts.

It had all begun almost exactly a year before the outbreak of war when the then Generalfeldmarschall Hermann Göring was on an earlier visit to the Junkers aircraft factory. By that time the Luftwaffe was irrevocably committed to becoming a wholly tactical air force, whose main role was to support the army in the field. Indeed, the lone voice championing the development of a four-engined heavy bomber for the Luftwaffe had been stilled when Generalleutnant Walther Wever, Chief of the General Air Staff, died in an air crash. And along with Wever, who had been at the controls of the Heinkel He 70 courier aircraft which plunged into the ground shortly after taking off from Dresden airport on the morning of 3 June 1936, had perished not only his flight-engineer, but also the Luftwaffe’s last chance of possessing a viable, long-range strategic bombing arm.

Wever’s successors were all staunch advocates of tactical air power, who thought solely in terms of dive-bombers and twin-engined medium bombers. And no machine fitted the latter bill more perfectly than the *Schnellbomber* – or

The first prototype Ju 88 V1, powered by two 1000-hp Daimler Benz DB 600Aa engines, first flew on 21 December 1936. After only a few weeks it was lost in an accident during high-speed flight testing





Test pilots Ernst Siebert and Kurt Heintz in front of the 1200-hp Junkers Jumo 211B-1 engined record-breaking fifth prototype

Despite impressive propaganda shots such as this, production of the Ju 88 was protracted and slow. These are fuselages of the A-4 variant, development of which began early in 1940

demonstrated the Ju 88's potential when it established a new world air speed record for its class, completing a 1000-km (621-mile) closed circuit between Dessau and the *Zugspitze* – Germany's highest Alpine peak – at an average speed of 517 kmh (321 mph).

But mass-production of the Ju 88 in the 12 months following Göring's



high-speed bomber – currently under development at Junkers' Dessau works.

So impressed was Göring by this new aircraft that within days of his visit he had written to Junkers' managing director, Dr Heinrich Koppenberg, granting him full authority to begin series production at once. This missive, dated 3 September 1938, ended with the words, 'And now build me a mighty bomber fleet of Ju 88s in the shortest time possible'.

The Junkers Ju 88 was undoubtedly an excellent design, well deserving of the term *Wunderbomber* which was soon bestowed upon it. The first prototypes were unarmed, the original intention being that the Ju 88 – like the RAF's later Mosquito bomber – would rely entirely on its superior speed to escape the attention of enemy fighters. In March 1939 the fifth prototype

letter of September 1938 did not go entirely according to plan. In fact, it hardly went at all. The prototypes which had made such an impression on the Generalfeldmarschall had been far from ready to enter series production. And to add to the usual assortment of teething troubles which inevitably beset any new design, reactionary elements within the RLM had since decreed that the *Wunderbomber* was to be equipped with defensive armament after all. Even more damaging was the decision to fit the Ju 88 with dive brakes, thereby allowing it to operate both as a high-speed level bomber *and* a dive-bomber.

The net result of this official tinkering with the basic design concept was not only a 65 kmh (40 mph)

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A trio of early Ju 88A-1s from a training unit. Note the high demarcation line between upper and lower camouflage surfaces of the furthestmost machine, and the small numerals on the tailfins. The snow on the ground would suggest that these are machines of *Lehrgruppe 88*, photographed in the winter of 1939-40

Walter Storp, who commanded I./KG 30's readiness flight at *Westerland*, pictured later in the war as a major, wearing the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross. In 1942 Storp became the first *Kommodore* of KG 6, and also served briefly as the *General der Kampflieger*



reduction in maximum speed, but the dashing of Göring's hopes for a steady stream of deliveries of the new bomber to his operational units.

Thus, on 1 September 1939, in place of the expected 'mighty bomber fleet of Ju 88s', the Luftwaffe embarked upon World War 2 with exactly 12 examples of the Junkers' twin in first-line service.

The term 'first-line' was something of a misnomer, too. Only days earlier these dozen machines had formed part of the experimental *Erprobungskommando 88*, the unit

tasked with testing the bomber under service conditions and evolving suitable training procedures. On the eve of hostilities 12 selected crews and their aircraft had been detached from *EKdo 88* and transferred to Jever, where they were to operate under their newly appointed *Staffelkapitän*, Hauptmann Helmut Pohle, as I./KG 25.

Forty-eight hours after Hitler's troops marched into Poland, Great Britain declared war on Germany. In immediate response on that same 3 September *Lufflotte 2* – the command stationed in, and responsible for the defence of, north-western Germany – raised the status of one of its special-duties staffs (*Stab des Generals z. b. V.*) to that of a *Flieger-Division*.

Commanded by Generalleutnant Hans Ferdinand Geisler from his HQ at Blankenese on the banks of the River Elbe, 10. *Flieger-Division's* primary role was to be anti-shipping – more specifically, it was to seek out and destroy units of the Royal Navy in, and across, the North Sea. Geisler's main strike force was provided by the Heinkel He 111 bombers of KG 26, known as the 'Lion' *Geschwader*. But as over half that unit's strength was currently engaged in the offensive against Poland, the dozen Ju 88s of I./KG 25 stationed at Jever were added to Geisler's Division to bolster its somewhat meagre order of battle.

The AOC of *Lufflotte 2* had other ideas, however. *General der Flieger* Helmuth Felmy was firmly of the opinion that it would be a grave mistake to throw a new and untried unit, flying an aircraft still officially undergoing technical trials, piecemeal into battle in this way. He therefore ordered the withdrawal of I./KG 25 back east to Greifswald in Pomerania, home-base of the *EKdo 88*, where a second operational *Staffel* of six Ju 88s – 2./KG 25 – was already forming.

On 7 September 1939 the short-lived KG 25 disappeared from Luftwaffe records when these two *Staffeln*, soon to be joined by a third, were redesignated to become I./KG 30. The new *Gruppe* began a hectic period of working up. But, as *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Helmut Pohle later explained; 'General Felmy did make one concession. He allowed a readiness flight to remain in the west. These four machines, commanded by Leutnant Walter Storp, transferred from Jever up to *Westerland* on the island of Sylt. The General promised that when the English fleet next put in an appearance, the readiness flight would not be left idle.

He rejected my suggestion that the whole *Gruppe* be used in any forthcoming action.’

The General was not simply keeping a tight rein on an overly eager subordinate. His strong convictions also prompted him to write to the High Command in Berlin urging restraint. The new Ju 88 should not be used in dribs and drabs, he cautioned. Patience should be exercised until at least a complete *Geschwader* – a minimum of 100 aircraft – was declared operational and ready to launch a mass attack.

But Göring would have none of it. This business with the Ju 88 had dragged on long enough already. The *Wunderbomber* needed a success to establish its reputation – and it needed it quickly. The opportunity was not long in coming.

On the morning of 26 September 1939 a Dornier Do 18 flying boat of 2.(F)/106 from Norderney was patrolling the North Sea. Suddenly, through a rift in the clouds, the observer spotted the tell-tale wake of a large ship travelling at speed. As the Do 18 continued to circle above the one break in the otherwise solid undercast, two more heavy ships hove into view.

The crew of the flying boat had stumbled across major units of the British Home Fleet. The battlecruisers *Hood* and *Renown*, accompanied by the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, together with a cruiser squadron and attendant destroyers, had been sent out to act as cover for a second cruiser squadron which was escorting the submarine *Spearfish* – badly damaged off the coast of Denmark and unable to dive – back across the North Sea. Also in the vicinity, providing deeper support, were the battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney*.

News of the sighting was radioed back to base, where no time was lost in alerting the bomber crews on Sylt. Their orders were succinct and explicit; ‘Enemy located in grid square 4022. Long-range reconnaissance maintaining contact. Attack with 500-kg bombs’.

The first to take off, at 1250 hours local time, were nine He 111s of 4./KG 26. Some ten minutes later the four Ju 88s of I./KG 30’s ‘readiness flight’ followed them into the air. Leutnant Walter Storp takes up the story;

‘The crew were just going to lunch when a long-distance telephone call came in.

“Emergency readiness!”

‘I dashed across to the operations room. A reported enemy sighting; two English battlecruisers, an aircraft carrier and a number of small destroyers and torpedo-boats in the middle of the North Sea, roughly half-way between the east coast of Scotland and the Norwegian coast. Course westwards.

‘Naturally, our main target is the carrier. We take off individually – one after the other. My orders are to approach at low level. And after only



A Ju 88A-1 of I./KG 30, the *Gruppe* which first took the *Wunderbomber* into action over the North Sea. It is pictured at dusk, presumably having just returned from such a mission. Note the extended underwing dive-brake. Although identified as aircraft ‘4D+BB’ of the *Gruppenstab*, this machine wears the badge usually ascribed to 1. *Staffel* . . .



... and a closer look at the badge in question, which depicts Chamberlain's famous umbrella – a motif often used to represent England in Luftwaffe heraldry during the early months of the war – with a German bombsight superimposed. In this case, however, the bombsight itself appears to have been the target, as witness the ringed shrapnel damage caused by a near miss from an anti-aircraft shell

A contemporary newspaper portrait of Carl Francke published in mid-October 1939 and captioned; 'Promoted from Gefreite to Leutnant'. The bubble had yet to burst

Francke had won an individual speed record and the climb and dive competition in Bf 109 fighter prototypes.

The successful German contingent at Dübendorf had been led by Ernst Udet, then Director of the Technical Department of the RLM. Francke's close ties with the colourful Udet had no doubt smoothed his passage when, in August 1939, he volunteered for military service with *Erprobungskommando 88* under the command of another old friend, Hauptmann Helmut Pohle.



about an hour's flying we make contact. The first ships we see are a pair of cruisers. Arriving out of the sun we fly past them and realise, to our astonishment, that they haven't spotted us.

'Should we attack them? No, our main target is the aircraft carrier! We continue to head northwards.

'Look there! The carrier. Suddenly a tall column, grey-black and close alongside. That was the first bomb from the machine ahead of me.'

Flying that machine was Gefreite (Aircraftman First Class) Carl Francke.

The lowly military rank belied Francke's background and true abilities. In fact, he was a qualified engineer, aircraft technician and highly experienced civilian test pilot. As leader of the Ju 88's technical trials programme at Rechlin, he knew the aircraft inside out. But he was not only a skilled test pilot; he was a passionate flyer too. As a member of the German team at the 4th International Flying Meeting held at Zürich-Dübendorf in the summer of 1937, Dipl.-Ing. Carl

Having exchanged his trademark white overalls for a regulation issue flying suit with a single stripe on each sleeve, and now rejoicing in the nickname of '*Biber*' ('Beaver') – a sly dig at his carefully nurtured and lovingly tended moustache – the erstwhile test pilot was a natural choice to captain one of the four Ju 88s awaiting their baptism of fire.

On 26 September Gefreiter Francke had been number three to take off; 'We lifted off shortly before 1300 hours. As an experienced old aviation sea-dog, I flew at a height of 500 metres (1640 ft), for a thick bank of unbroken cloud stretched above us. At this altitude I had a better chance of spotting the enemy fleet.

'At the expected time, almost to the minute, the ships came into sight. Real heavyweights, just as reconnaissance had reported. As we were heading straight for them, I turned slightly to get into a better attacking position and climbed to 3000 metres (9840 ft). This took us above the cloud layer, which meant that the carrier was invisible as I commenced my dive. On breaking back down through the cloud it was immediately apparent that the attack would not be successful. The target was not centred in my sights.'

From his previous experiences at Rechlin, Francke was fully conversant not only with the Ju 88's capabilities, but also its limitations. He knew that he was too wide of the mark to be able to correct his course during the dive, and that there was no other option but to break off the attack and make a second attempt. As he climbed back towards the safety of the clouds, his mind registered the lack of response from the carrier.

In fact, members of the *Ark Royal's* crew had been watching Francke's movements with interest. They had mistaken the unfamiliar shape of the Junkers for that of a Lockheed Hudson, and were marvelling at the manoeuvrability of Coastal Command's new American twin. It was not until an able-seaman up on the range-finder pointed out to his officer that, 'Udsons don't 'ave bloody great crosses under their wings', that the penny dropped!

When Francke re-appeared out of the clouds some eight minutes later, the *Ark's* anti-aircraft gunners were ready and waiting;

'I initiated the second attack from 2700 metres (8856 ft). This time when I emerged from the clouds I was almost bang on target. A slight adjustment was all that was needed. The fire from the ship's flak made it stand out like some giant, illuminated advertising hoarding. But nothing hit us.

'At the correct altitude I pressed the bomb release button. The first bomb exploded in the water some 20 metres (65 ft) from the target, but the second hit the carrier on the starboard side.

'Unfortunately, at the moment of impact, I was fully occupied recovering from the dive, but the crew reported seeing a thick black cloud of smoke and signs of fire.

'Aircraft of the reconnaissance squadron kept a close watch on the carrier. Although it remained with the fleet, it was listing badly and apparently unable to hold a steady course.

'The next day, when the fleet was sighted again, the two battlecruisers were on their own and there was no sign of the aircraft carrier. It had disappeared.'

But the *Ark Royal* had not been sunk. Timing his move to perfection, her captain had ordered the helm spun hard over, which turned the ship out of the path of the falling 1000-lb bomb. The missile – which one officer likened to the 'size of a London bus' – exploded on impact with the sea less than five metres (15 ft) from the *Ark's* stem.

A huge wall of white water was thrown up. It came crashing down on the for'ard end of the flightdeck. The hull shuddered to the blast as the