

# *Jagdgeschwader 2*

*'Richthofen'*



John Weal

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John Weal

Series editor Tony Holmes

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# THE EARLY YEARS

**D**ie Reklamestaffel Mitteldeutschlands, Deutscher Luftsportverband, eingetragener Verein (Döberitz) (The Central-German Publicity Squadron, German Air-Sports Club Registered Association (Döberitz)) is an imposing enough title in either German or English. But when the unit saddled with this lengthy, if seemingly innocuous, appellation also proves to be the fountain-head from which sprang – either directly or otherwise – almost the entire pre-war fighter, *Zerstörer* and dive-bomber strength of the German Luftwaffe, then it clearly warrants closer scrutiny.

Contrary to long-held belief, the Third Reich's air arm did not rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes the moment Adolf Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933. Although cloaked in a veil of secrecy and official deception, its period of gestation had already been underway for more than a decade under the watchful auspices of the Weimar Republic.

Military aviation had come of age during World War 1. In just four short, cataclysmic years, from 1914 to 1918, the warplane had evolved from a stick-and-string novelty that was largely frowned upon for frightening the cavalry horses, into a deadly weapon of terror and destruction so feared that the victorious allies sought to eradicate entirely Germany's still formidable air forces.

Although the post-war Treaty of Versailles, signed in that palace's great Hall of Mirrors on 28 June 1919, permitted the vanquished foe to retain a token ground army of 100,000 men, it expressly prohibited Germany from keeping a single one of the nearly 20,000 military aircraft still on charge at the close of hostilities.

So all-embracing were the conditions imposed by the Allies that the 75,000 word Treaty, comprising 440 separate articles, required just five sweeping clauses to effectively expunge German military aviation from the post-war European scene. Article 198 of the Treaty stated that Germany was forbidden from maintaining 'either land-based or naval air forces', while Article 202 sought to ensure compliance with the victors' demands by decreeing that all existing military aircraft were to be surrendered to the Allies.

But the Treaty of Versailles was not as watertight as those responsible for its implementation imagined it to be. A number of ploys were used to outwit the officers of the Allied Control Commission. Some 1000 aircraft were reportedly smuggled abroad and sold, others were registered in the technically Free City of Danzig, while still more were quite simply hidden.

Nor was it only in terms of hardware that the Germans sought to circumvent the conditions imposed by the hated *Versailler Diktat*. From its very inception the 100,000-man army permitted by the Treaty had managed surreptitiously to include among its 4000-strong officer corps some 120 ex-World War 1 flyers. And since then ever-increasing numbers of flying personnel had been clandestinely trained, and machines secretly developed, with the connivance of certain foreign governments. Foremost

amongst these were undoubtedly the Soviets who, in 1925, placed at Germany's disposal the airfield at Lipetsk, approximately 240 miles (385 km) south of Moscow.

Over the course of the next eight years some 200 pilots and aircrew underwent training at Lipetsk. Not all enjoyed the decidedly spartan and primitive facilities offered by their temporary Russian home. Indeed, new intakes for each six-month course were greeted by a sign which, roughly translated, read 'Welcome to the arse-end of the world!' But without this small, yet invaluable, cadre of experienced officers, which included such later wartime luminaries as Falck, Gentzen, Lützow, Rubensdörffer and Trautloft, it would have been all but impossible to carry out the Luftwaffe's ambitious expansion programmes of the mid-1930s.

In the autumn of 1930 preparations were being made for the activation of a military air arm in the Homeland itself. And by year's end, the first three army flying units proper (as opposed to the thinly-disguised 'civil' flying schools, which had been in operation since 1924) were formed.

Disguised to the outside world as *Reklamestaffeln* (publicity squadrons – this name being deliberately chosen to imply their use for industrial aerial-advertising purposes), the three units were set up at Berlin-Staaken, Fürth, near Nuremberg, and Königsberg in East Prussia. Operating as an integral part of the *Reichsheer*, they were employed on target-towing, artillery spotting, liaison and other allied duties whenever the army embarked upon field manoeuvres.

The next stage in the Weimar Republic's stealthy reconstruction of an army air force was to have been the creation early in 1933 of a complete *Jagdgeschwader* equipped with Italian Fiat CR 30 fighters. But when this scheme came to naught, the *Reichswehrministerium* had perforce to set its sights a little lower, confining itself instead to the formation of a single *Jagdgruppe* for the coming autumn. Each of the three *Reklamestaffeln* was called upon to contribute to this venture, but it fell to the Berlin-Staaken squadron to provide the working nucleus for the new *Jagdgruppe*, which was to be set up at nearby Döberitz-Elsgrund.

In the event, formal – albeit still clandestine – activation did not take place until 1 April 1934. By this time the National-Socialist Party had been in power for more than a year. But just how unaware the new rulers of Germany had been of the groundwork laid by their predecessors was

Spanning the gap between the two World Wars, Robert Ritter von Greim, pictured here wearing the *Pour le Mérite* for his 25 victories in the earlier conflict, was selected to command the new Luftwaffe's first *Jagdgruppe*





graphically illustrated by a comment made by Hermann Göring, the newly-appointed Reich Commissar for Aviation, when he was first shown around the secret aviation test centre at Rechlin. 'I had no idea you had progressed so far', he remarked, 'All the better!'

1 April 1934 (coincidentally the RAF's 16th birthday) also marked the covert recognition of the Luftwaffe as a separate arm of the Wehrmacht. Not only had the first operational *Gruppe* been formed, an entire command structure was put in place. Overall control was assumed by Hermann Göring in his new role as *Reichsminister der Luftfahrt* (Minister of Aviation), although this peaceable title was somewhat compromised by his initially retaining the now incongruous rank of *General der Infanterie*.

Under Göring's ministry, Germany was divided into six territorial administrative zones (*Luftkreiskommandos*), and the first tactical command was established. This latter, known as 1. *Fliegerdivision*, was headed by Oberst Hugo Sperrle. It was brought into being by the simple expedient of enlarging, and then dividing, the HQ Staff already assigned to Sperrle in his capacity as *Kommandeur der Heeresflieger* (C-in-C Army Aviation), thereby enabling him to discharge both offices simultaneously.

Although it quickly dispersed with the unwieldy title quoted at the head of this chapter, the new fighter unit preserved some semblance of secrecy by operating under the designation of *Fliegergruppe* (Air Wing) Döberitz. This form of nomenclature, which would remain in force until June 1936, offered no clue as to a *Gruppe's* specific function, nor as to its position within the Luftwaffe organisation as a whole.

The officer selected to command *Fliegergruppe* Döberitz was 41-year-old Major Robert Ritter von Greim, whose military career had begun as a cadet with a Royal Bavarian Railway Battalion in 1911. Transferring to the air arm, he had served with distinction as *Staffelführer* of *Jasta 34* during World War 1 (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 32 - Albatros Aces of World War 1* for further details). By the end of that conflict he had been awarded the *Pour le Mérite* ('Blue Max'), and was leading *Jagdgruppe 10*.

Now honoured with command of the Third Reich's first fighter *Gruppe*, von Greim set about the task of training it to a high level of proficiency. In this he was ably assisted by his three chosen *Staffelkapitäne*:

***Fliegergruppe* Döberitz was initially equipped with a dozen Arado Ar 65 single-seat fighters, each bearing civilian-style registration**

Hauptleute Johann Raithel, Hans-Hugo Witt and Hans-Jürgen von Cramon-Taubadel.

Hardly had they begun their own working-up, however, before the *Gruppe* was tasked with two additional duties. One was the training of an entirely separate cadre of personnel in readiness for the activation of a planned second *Jagdgruppe*. The other was to initiate a programme of dive-bombing practice in order to be able to provide qualified pilots for the first of the projected *Stukagruppen*.

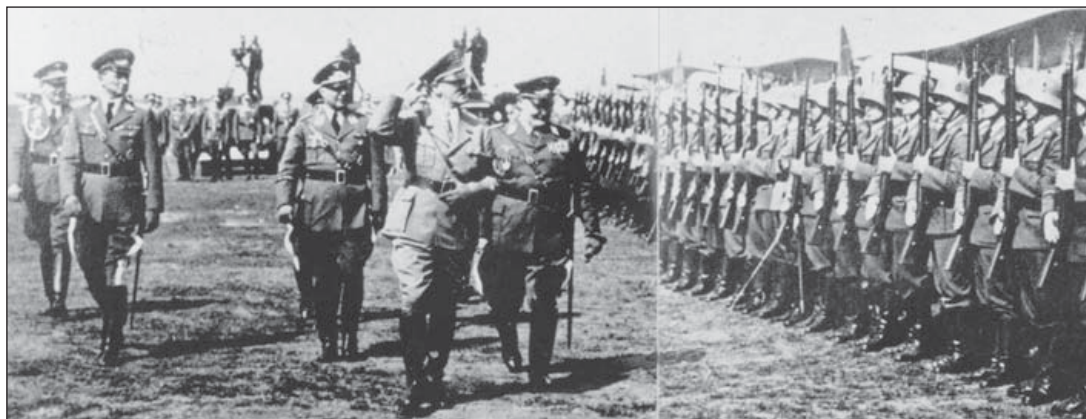
Döberitz's initial complement of 12 Arado Ar 65s was patently inadequate to cope with such demands, and by year-end its numbers had been substantially increased. No fewer than 80 Arados were by now in service, these being divided almost equally between the *Gruppe* and the fighter school at Schleissheim, near Munich.

On 26 February 1935 Hitler, Göring and von Blomberg (the latter as Minister of Defence and C-in-C of the Wehrmacht) signed the so-called 'Reichsluftwaffe Decree'. This officially proclaimed the Luftwaffe (although the term 'Reichsluftwaffe' was strictly the more accurate, it never found public favour or entered official usage) as a third, and entirely separate, branch of the armed services. At the same time it finally did away with the all too threadbare veil of secrecy which, for the past decade and a half, had enshrouded Germany's military aviation activities. Far from being a political embarrassment, the emergent Luftwaffe could now be used as a powerful propaganda tool, either to woo potential allies, or to impress traditional foes, as the occasion demanded.

The decree came into effect on 1 March 1935. It was on this date that personnel discarded the garb and insignia of the DLV (the German Air-Sports Association), which they had been wearing since the *Reklamestaffeln's* inception, and changed into the brand new uniform of the Luftwaffe (whose smart collar and tie earned them the disparaging nickname of 'weekend warriors' from some die-hards).

Exactly a fortnight later, on 14 March, and amidst much swastika-beflagged pageantry, *Fliegergruppe* Döberitz was ceremonially paraded before an emotional Führer. In order to instil a sense of continuity and forge links with an illustrious past, the first *Gruppe* of the new Luftwaffe was to assume the mantle of Germany's most famous World War 1 fighter pilot. Henceforth, Hitler declared, the unit would bear the title 'Richthofen';

**14 March 1935, and a section from a panoramic montage shows Adolf Hitler, flanked by von Greim and Göring, reviewing the men and machines of the *Fliegergruppe* Döberitz, upon whom he has just conferred the title 'Richthofen'. Note the newsreel cameramen atop the vehicles following behind**



'I announce this edict secure in the knowledge and belief that the *Jagdgeschwader "Richthofen"* – imbued with the lofty ideals of the honour and tradition hereby accorded – will prove itself forever equal, both in spirit and performance, to its holy obligations.'

In the days and weeks that followed, Göring and other high-ranking officers held a series of press conferences. The Döberitz aircraft also made a number of diligently rehearsed public appearances. On 19 March they staged a massed fly-past over the centre of the German capital, a display that was to be repeated on 10 April on the occasion of Göring's marriage to the film actress Emmy Sonnemann. These events afforded the Berlin-based correspondents of the world's press ample opportunity to observe, misinterpret, and pass on to their air-conscious readers disturbing accounts of the Luftwaffe's apparent sudden strength and preparedness.

But one fact was kept carefully concealed from the journalists. The fighter unit at Döberitz was still the only *Jagdgruppe* in the Third Reich's much publicised armoury!

Nor were the media representatives the only ones to be hoodwinked. When asked the current strength of the German air force by Britain's then Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, who was on an official visit to Berlin at this time, Hitler calmly replied that it had 'reached parity with Great Britain'!

But moves were already in hand to address the situation as the Luftwaffe now embarked upon the first of an increasingly ambitious series of expansion programmes aimed at strengthening its numbers. Before April was out significant changes had occurred within the ranks of *Fliegergruppe* Döberitz.

Ritter von Greim was appointed to the post of Inspector of Fighters and Dive-Bombers. His place was taken by Major Kurt von Doering, who had been a *Staffelführer* in Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen's original *Jagdgeschwader* Nr.1 back in June 1917. Von Doering immediately lost the experienced leader of his 1. *Staffel* when Johann Raithel was promoted to major and departed for Jüterbog-Damm to activate the long awaited second *Gruppe*.

Two of Raithel's *Staffelkapitäne* were also ex-World War 1 fighter pilots. Major Karl-August von Schönebeck, who had claimed eight Allied machines during the 1914-18 conflict, headed the first *Staffel*. The second went to Major Theo Osterkamp, a 32-victory ex-naval

Major Johann Raithel was the first Kommandeur of *Fliegergruppe* Damm





Although these are pre-production machines, the 'Richthofen' Gruppen's first Heinkel He 51s also wore quasi-civilian 'D' codes as shown here, and – until the autumn of 1935 – the old Imperial red-white-black stripes on the starboard side of the tailfin and rudder

ace who, with von Greim's appointment to a staff position, was now the only active flying member of the fledgling Luftwaffe to sport the coveted *Pour le Mérite*. Raithel's third *Staffel* was taken over by Hauptmann von Kormatzki, a relative youngster in comparison to his two veteran colleagues, who had previously served as Ritter von Greim's adjutant at Döberitz.

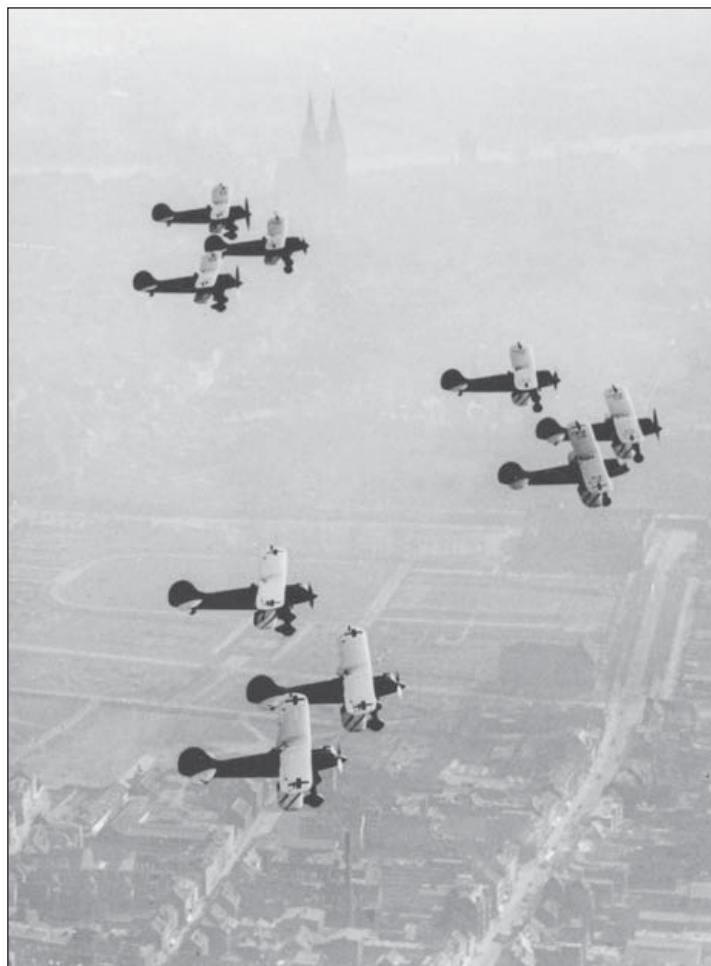
In keeping with current policy, Raithel's unit was initially known as *Fliegergruppe Damm* (the cover title *Fliegergruppe Jüterbog* having already been allocated to an on-site supply depot). A good-natured, but intense, rivalry soon sprang up between the two 'Richthofen' Gruppen, with Döberitz remaining the undisputed showpiece of the Luftwaffe. The station's modern mess hall, or *Kasino*, dominated by a life-sized portrait in oils of the immortal Rittmeister himself, played host to many a dignitary and visiting foreign official.

All the more understandable, therefore, was the satisfaction felt by Raithel's pilots – still roughing it on their as-yet unfinished base outside Jüterbog – when they learned that they had been selected to receive the first production models of Heinkel's new He 51 fighter.

During the summer of 1935 both Gruppen converted completely to the Heinkel. And the keen spirit of competition between the two – expressed on one memorable occasion by Raithel's pilots reportedly flying across to Döberitz dressed in full suits of armour to challenge their opposite numbers to a tournament, with the losers to pay the bar bill – ensured that each were soon absolute masters of their new mounts.

On an official level, however, there existed a clear-cut division of labour. Döberitz was responsible for the testing of weapons and ancillary equipment, and for conducting trials with the ground organisation, while Damm was charged with perfecting the tactics of aerial pursuit and interception. The latter unit also undertook experiments related to the proposed introduction of 'heavy' fighter units (the later *Zerstörer*).

The 'Richthofen' pilots demonstrate their growing expertise with these tightly-flown *Ketten* high above Cologne. The unmistakable twin spires of the city's great Gothic cathedral and the River Rhine beyond can just be seen emerging from the early morning mist



After a hectic autumn and winter thus spent, the opening weeks of 1936 were marked by a sudden influx of pilots and machines into Döberitz and, to a lesser extent, Jüterbog-Damm. A political crisis – the first of many to punctuate the latter half of the 1930s – was obviously brewing.

On 24 February a sizeable detachment departed Döberitz for Lippstadt, east of Dortmund. Here, they were joined by a group of pilots straight from the Schleissheim fighter school, who brought with them a number of that establishment's Ar 65s and He 51s so as to form *Fliegergruppe* Lippstadt.

Twelve days later the reason for all the feverish activity of the past few weeks became apparent. On 7 March 1936, in blatant defiance of the provisions laid down in the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler marched his troops into the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland.

All three of the Luftwaffe's *Jagdgruppen* now became involved in a gigantic game of bluff as they spearheaded the Führer's first exercise in sabre-rattling. The two 'Richthofen' units had taken off from Döberitz and Jüterbog-Damm before sunrise. Once aloft, the pilots opened sealed orders which instructed them to land on forward fields just short of the Rhine and 'immediately refuel and cover the advancing ground columns against enemy reconnaissance and attack from the air'.

*Fliegergruppe* Döberitz's designated area extended across the Rhineland-Palatinate from Karlsruhe up as far as Koblenz. Raithel's *Fliegergruppe* Damm was to cover the adjoining sector northwards from the Rhine's confluence with the Moselle up to the Ruhr (where the Lippstadt contingent assumed responsibility).

The experiences of Major Osterkamp's *Staffel*, based temporarily at Werl (itself not far from Lippstadt), were typical. For the next three days its pilots spent nearly every waking minute in the air, landing only to refuel, snatch a few hurried mouthfuls of food and a cup of strong coffee, before taking off again.

Appearances were all that mattered – appearances of a strong, powerful and ubiquitous Luftwaffe. On one sortie they would be patrolling in *Staffel* formation low over the rooftops of Aachen. On the next they could be in individual *Ketten* winging high above the twin spires of Cologne cathedral. But always they would return to flaunt their apparent strength along the border zones with France.

And, much to Osterkamp's relief, the bluff worked. Not a single French fighter rose to challenge their presence – which was perhaps just as well, for not one of the *Staffel's* Heinkels, in common with the majority of the Luftwaffe machines committed to this hazardous deception, was armed!

Although it was undoubtedly fortunate for Osterkamp and his fellow pilots that there had been no immediate retaliatory action from either the French – or the British – in the face of this, Hitler's first defiant show of arms, the allies' signal lack of response to such provocation did not bode well for Europe's immediate future.

The success of the Rhineland episode led to three more *Jagdgruppen* quickly being formed. Before March was out another cadre had been hived off, this time from *Fliegergruppe* Damm, to become the resident *Jagdgruppe* at Dortmund. And on 1 April 1936 two further '*Richthofen*' *Staffeln* were detached (one each from Döberitz and Damm) and transferred to Bernburg and Werl respectively to provide the nuclei for new *Gruppen* at these bases.

Thus, in the space of just five short, but eventful, weeks the two '*Richthofen*' *Gruppen* had, between them, been instrumental in establishing four completely new *Jagdgruppen*. This trebling of the Luftwaffe's fighter strength led, in turn, to the creation of the first two *Jagdgeschwaderstäbe*.

Not unnaturally, the officers appointed to head these new *Stäbe* – and thereby become the first two *Geschwaderkommodores* of the embryonic *Jagdwaaffe* – were the most experienced unit leaders then available: the *Kommandeure* of *Fliegergruppen* Döberitz and Damm. On 1 April 1936 von Döering left Döberitz, and the '*Richthofen*' fold, to assume command of the newly-titled *Jagdgeschwader 'Horst Wessel'* (the later ZG 26) at Dortmund. Major Raithel made the shorter hop from Jüterbog-Damm to Döberitz to take office as *Kommodore* of the *Jagdgeschwader 'Richthofen'*.

The two *Gruppenkommandeur* slots thus made vacant were quickly filled. One of Raithel's erstwhile *Staffelkapitäne* at Damm, Karl-August von Schönebeck, was promoted to take his place, while Major Karl Vieck was transferred in from his duties as a course leader at the Schleissheim fighter school to head the Döberitz *Gruppe*.

Exactly two months after this command reshuffle, on 1 June 1936, the Luftwaffe finally did away with

While the first operational units were showcasing the Luftwaffe to the world, the pre-war training organisation was busy producing a whole new generation of flyers. Seen engrossed in a post-flight debriefing in front of a *Schleiflheim* He 51 trainer, this lieutenant instructor (right) seems content enough with his pupil's progress – as well he might, for the fährnrich (officer cadet) on the left is one Egon Mayer, a future *Kommodore* of JG 2





the last vestiges of organisational anonymity by scrapping the generic *Fliegergruppe* title, which had hitherto been applied to all units irrespective of their function. The Luftwaffe had now grown into a force totalling 23 *Gruppen* of all types, and the basic unit would henceforth be the *Geschwader*.

Each *Geschwader* would be identified by a specific three-digit designator. These three digits would indicate respectively (a) the *Geschwader* seniority by role (e.g. fighter, bomber etc.), (b) the actual role itself, and (c) the territorial command in which the *Geschwader* was located.

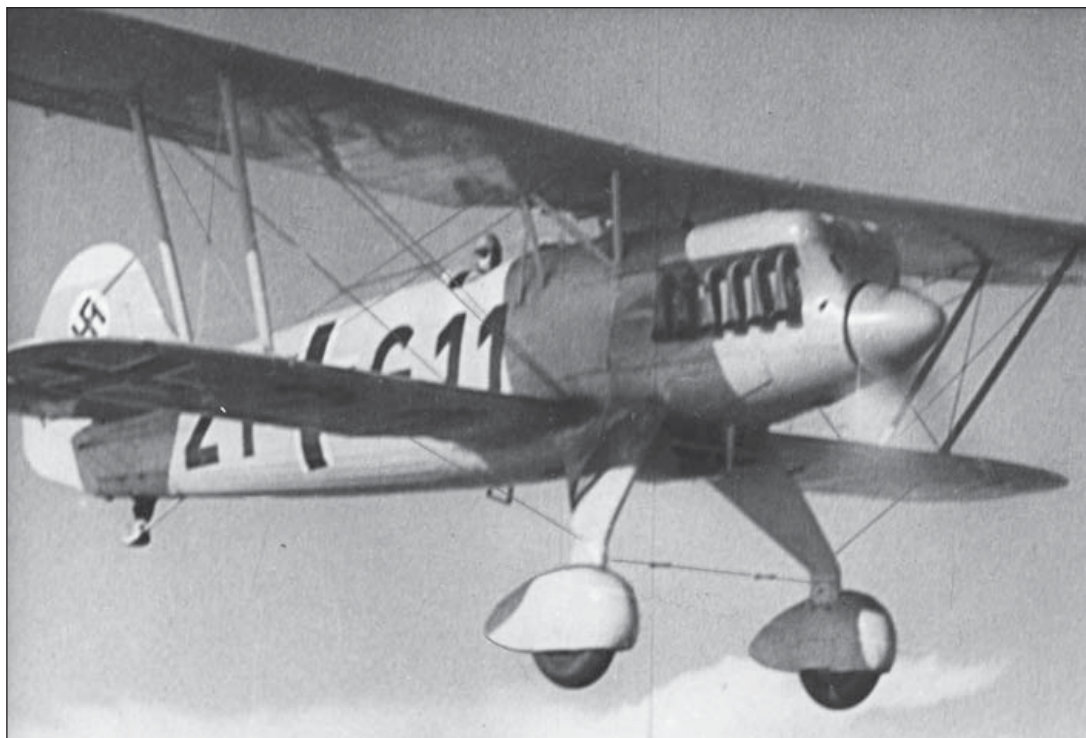
Under this new system, the *Jagdgeschwader 'Richthofen'* now found itself operating as JG 132 which, to those in the know, revealed it to be the senior fighter *Geschwader* based in the Berlin area – '1' indicated its being the first unit of its kind to be activated, '3' the code for fighters, and '2' referred to *Luftkreiskommando II*, i.e. the Berlin region.

Within the framework of the *Geschwader*, each *Gruppe* was identified by a Roman numeral prefix (and their component *Staffeln*, in turn, by Arabic numeral prefixes). Thus, the *Fliegergruppen* Döberitz and Damm now emerged as I./JG 132 (with 1. to 3. *Staffeln*) and II./JG 132 (4. to 6. *Staffeln*) respectively.

He 51s of the recently re-designated JG 132 '*Richthofen*' display their new military markings. Warming up their engines at Jüterbog–Damm prior to take-off, these are aircraft of 6./JG 132, as witness the 'last two' of 'E-Emil' in the foreground – the '23' indicates, in reverse, the 3rd *Staffel* of the 2nd *Gruppe*

Also from II. *Gruppe*, these Heinkels have had their wheel spats removed in order to better cope with Jüterbog's sometimes less than ideal grass surface. Close scrutiny of the original print reveals that each aircraft carries an individual name (in small white letters on the red of the engine cowling immediately above the undercarriage leg fairing), that of the 4. *Staffel* machine on the left being *Greif* (Griffon). Note the camouflaged Ju 52/3m bomber-transport in the background





Taken during JG 132's brief flirtation with oversized fuselage codes (applied in an attempt to improve air-to-air recognition), this in-flight shot of 1. *Staffel's* 21+G11 also illustrates one of the pitfalls of black and white imagery. What, at first glance, appears to be an all-grey machine is, in fact, identical to those seen on the previous page – the tailband behind the white swastika disc, and the entire engine cowling and spinner, are painted bright 'Richthofen' red

Major Johann Raithel was *Kommodore* of JG 132 for all of nine weeks before being elevated to the post of Inspector of Fighters. On 9 June Oberst Gerd von Massow was appointed to command the *Jagdgeschwader 'Richthofen'*.

The latter half of 1936 was spent in making good the losses in trained personnel which had been incurred by the *Gruppen's* involvement in establishing the four new fighter units earlier in the year. They were back to full strength and peak proficiency just in time for the second wave of planned expansions in the spring of 1937.

This latest programme called for the doubling of the existing number of *Jagdgruppen* from six to twelve, plus the subsequent creation of an additional twelve autonomous *Jagdstaffeln* – one to be set up by each individual *Jagdgruppe* – of which more later. In the event, only two of the six new *Gruppen* activated in the spring of 1937 were created around cadres drawn from Döberitz and Damm: I./JG 131, scheduled for deployment to Jesau in East Prussia, and II./JG 334, which was to be stationed at Mannheim.

The pruning of the *Geschwader's* strength early in 1937 was thus by no means as severe as that inflicted upon it the previous year. And any depletion it did suffer was more than compensated for in the weeks that followed when JG 132 was selected to be the first recipient of Professor Willy Messerschmitt's revolutionary new Bf 109 monoplane fighter.

After a brief transitional period spent testing the Bf 109B-0 pre-production version of this advanced aircraft under service conditions, the *Geschwader* (more precisely II./JG 132 at Jüterbog-Damm) had begun conversion on to the B-1, and later the B-2, production variants. By the end of the summer of 1937, JG 132's scarlet-nosed Heinkel biplanes had given way entirely to the sleek new machines, each one of which bore the