

Aviation Elite Units 

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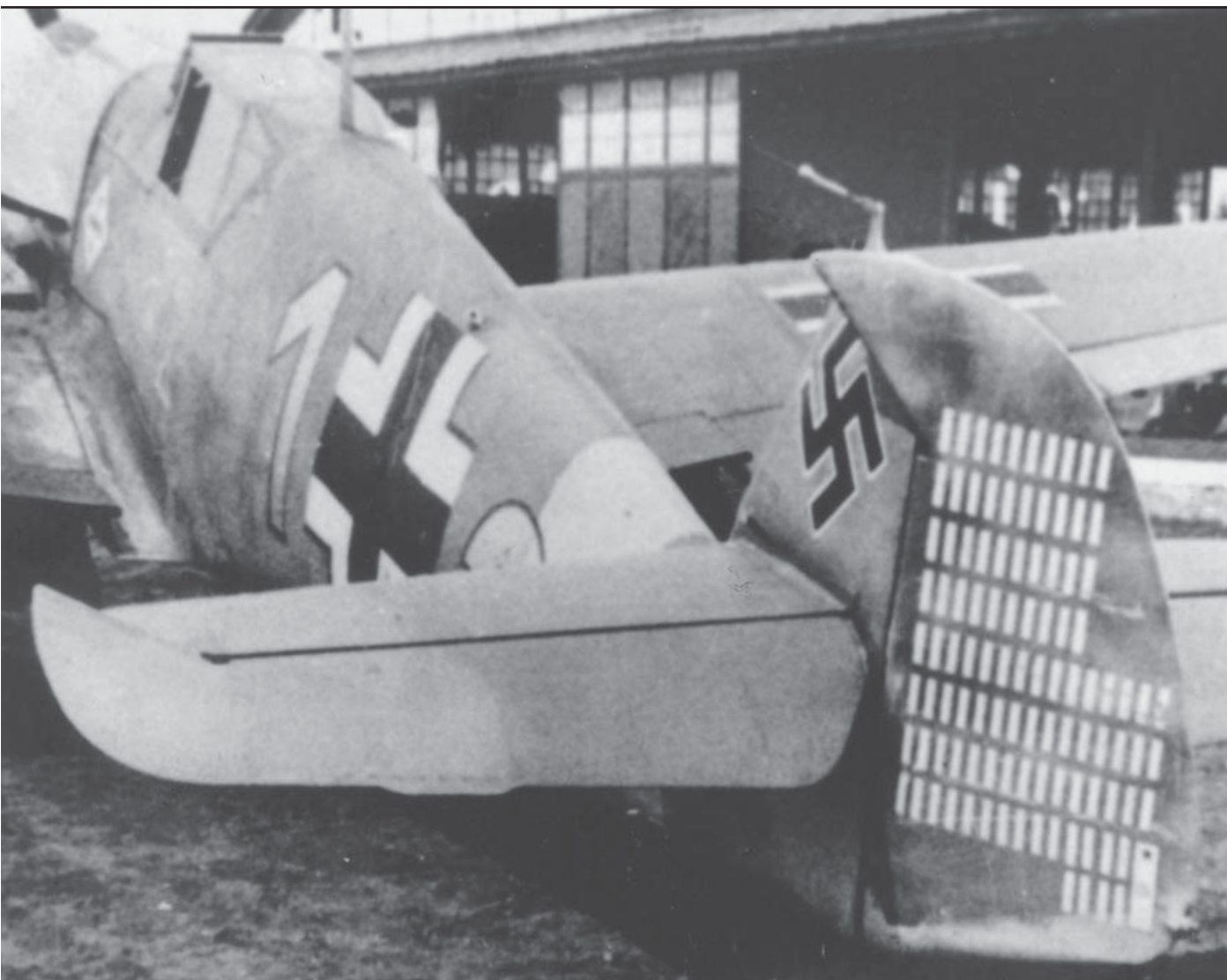
The Experten



John Weal

Jagdgeschwader 52

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Series editor Tony Holmes

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FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS

There are various ways of assessing the performance and effectiveness of a fighter unit. One famous fighter group is rightly proud of the fact that it did not lose a single one of its charges while engaged on bomber escort duties. Others can point with equal pride to their outstanding serviceability records, always being able to mount a maximum effort whenever called upon. Yet others can boast of completing operational tours with a minimum of combat casualties and exemplary kill-to-loss ratios.

But the commonest and most widely accepted measure of a fighter unit's success is the number of enemy machines it has shot down. And if this, admittedly rather simplistic, yardstick is applied, then one fighter formation towers head and shoulders above all the rest.

With well over 10,000 Allied aircraft destroyed during the course of World War 2, the Luftwaffe's *Jagdgeschwader 52* established a record not only unsurpassed in the annals of military aviation history to date, but one which seems likely to stand for all time.

Beyond the relatively narrow confines of the air war historian and enthusiast, however, the designation JG 52 remains little known. This may be due partly to the fact that the unit was never honoured with a title, or even given a popular name. The pilots of JG 52 were no 'Richthofen Circus' or 'Abbeville Boys'. Nor, for some reason, did their 'Winged Sword' emblem enjoy the same widespread public recognition as, for example, JG 53's 'Ace-of-Spades' insignia.

But the main reason for the general lack of acclaim accorded to this, the most successful fighter unit in the world, undoubtedly lies in the fact that for some two-thirds of its entire existence, JG 52 operated exclusively on the eastern front.

Many of its actions were fought over the vast, often tractless wastes of the Russian steppe, or above obscure villages and hamlets whose names are to be found on no modern map. And by far the overwhelming majority of its victims were machines hacked from the amorphous, and to this day still largely anonymous, ranks of the wartime Red Air Force.

Had JG 52 been employed on Reich's Defence duties over cities such as Berlin, Hamburg or Cologne, or had it defended western European airspace against incursions from some of the better known and more widely publicised RAF and USAAF fighter units and aces, then its story would no doubt have been very different indeed. But JG 52's history does at least have its roots in the west.

It began in November 1938 with the activation of a single *Jagdgruppe* at Ingolstadt-Manching, an airfield some 37 miles (60 km) due north of Munich. As its designation indicated, I./JG 433 was the first *Gruppe* of the fourth single-seat *Jagdgeschwader* to be formed within the area controlled

by *Luftwaffengruppenkommando 3* – the territorial command which covered all of southern Germany.

The officer selected to lead the *Gruppe* was Hauptmann Dietrich Graf von Pfeil und Klein-Ellguth, who had commanded the provisional *Fliegergruppe 10* during the Sudeten affair two months earlier.

The general easing of political tension throughout Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Sudeten crisis (which had been resolved by the signing of the Munich Agreement on 30 September 1938) was reflected in the slow, almost leisurely build-up of von Pfeil's new *Gruppe*. Although practically a full complement of Bf 109Ds was delivered to Ingolstadt during December, less than a dozen pilots had been posted in by year-end.

This discrepancy in numbers became academic when a spell of unexpectedly severe weather descended on much of Bavaria during the Christmas period. Housed in two unheated hangars, nearly every single one of the *Gruppe's* fighters was reportedly rendered unserviceable with their carburettor casings cracked as a result of the sharp overnight frosts.

Aircraft serviceability, and the weather, gradually improved during the opening weeks of 1939. New pilot intakes arrived fresh from training schools, and to assimilate these tyros and weld them into a cohesive whole von Pfeil was particularly fortunate in his appointed *Staffelkapitäne*, all three of whom were experienced veterans of the *Legion Condor. 2.* and



When first activated in 1938, I./JG 433 was initially equipped with Bf 109D-1s. This example provides a handy perch for a fully kitted-up Oberleutnant Lothar Ehrlich. Appointed *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 52 on 1 March 1940, Ehrlich was shot down off Margate on the opening day of III. *Gruppe's* disastrous participation in the Battle of Britain



Another founder-member of I./JG 433, Hauptmann Wolfgang Ewald served as *Kapitän* of 2. *Staffel* for almost 22 months before assuming command of I./JG 52 in August 1940. He is seen here as a major, wearing the Knight's Cross awarded to him in 1942 when *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 3 on the eastern front

3./JG 433 were commanded by Oberleutnants Wolfgang Ewald and Alfons Klein, respectively (each with a single victory claimed in Spain).

Heading 1. *Staffel*, von Pfeil's senior *Kapitän* was a certain Oberleutnant Adolf Galland. A flyer with a passion for fighters, Galland had been forced to spend his recent tour with the *Legion* leading a ground-attack unit equipped with Heinkel He 51 biplanes (see Osprey *Elite Units 13 - Luftwaffe Schlachtgruppen* for further details). Returning from Spain, he had then been ordered to help organise the *ad hoc* ground-attack force being readied for possible action against the Czechs in the disputed Sudetenland. It was not until his subsequent posting to I./JG 433, effective as of 1 November 1938, that Adolf Galland felt he was at last back where he truly belonged – at the controls of the Luftwaffe's most advanced single-seat fighter.

On 18 February 1939 the *Gruppe*, still not yet at full strength, was dealt a tragic blow. While *en route* from Ingolstadt to Berlin, the unit's transport Ju 52/3m encountered a snowstorm over the Eger hills and crashed due to severe icing. All 11 occupants, passengers and crew, lost their lives. Among the dead was Oberleutnant Alfons Klein, who had purportedly hitched a lift on the ill-fated flight in order to visit the Berlin Motor Show.

For the next ten days 3./JG 433 operated under the caretaker leadership of Oberleutnant Karl-Heinz Leesmann until the arrival of Klein's official replacement on 1 March. Like his unfortunate predecessor, Oberleutnant Helmut Kühle was also an ex-member of the *Legion Condor*.

March was to witness a number of other changes. Two further intakes of newly qualified pilots finally brought the *Gruppe* up to full establishment. The unit also took delivery of its first Bf 109Es (although it would not relinquish the last of its venerable *Doras* until July). And towards the end of the month moves were put in hand to transfer I./JG 433 to its new permanent station.

Situated a few miles to the south-west of Stuttgart, the grass airfield at Böblingen was then serving as that city's main commercial airport (today's Echterdingen was still in the throes of construction). Upon taking up residence, von Pfeil's pilots would thus find themselves initially sharing the immediate airspace with the Ju 52/3ms and He 70s of Deutsche Lufthansa, as well as with other civilian traffic, both domestic and foreign. It was not an altogether ideal arrangement, but it *was* indicative of the way the Third Reich's rapidly expanding military air arm was outstripping the ground facilities provided for it.

On 13 April 1939 the *Gruppe* celebrated its arrival in its new 'home town' with due pomp and ceremony. While Hauptmann Dietrich Graf von Pfeil led a parade through the streets of Böblingen, the unit's Bf 109s staged an impressive fly-past low overhead. Some sources indicate, however, that the aerial components did not in fact vacate Ingolstadt until 20 April, when at least one *Staffel* (Adolf Galland's 1./JG 433) dog-legged to Böblingen by way of Munich, where it participated in another fly-past, this time in honour of the Führer's 50th birthday.

It was while the *Gruppe* was still settling in at Böblingen, on 1 May 1939 that the new and much-simplified system of block designations was introduced throughout most of the Luftwaffe. Henceforth, all fighter units stationed within the area controlled by *Lufiflotte 3* (as *Luftwaffen-gruppenkommando* (*Lw.Gr.Kdo.*) 3 had itself been redesignated) would be

identified sequentially by numbers in the block 51-75. And whereas I./JG 433 had been in fourth (and last) position in *Lw.Gr.Kdo. 3*'s single-seat fighter hierarchy, they were, for some reason, moved up two places during the re-numbering process to emerge as I./JG 52.

The ensuing summer months were taken up by a constant round of exercises and manoeuvres, both local – on one occasion I./JG 52 was tasked with defending nearby Stuttgart against an 'enemy' bomber fleet – and further afield.

In June the *Gruppe* was ordered to carry out a transfer to Wengerohr, a small field on the northern slopes of the Mosel (Moselle) valley. Hauptmann von Pfeil's unit may have been up to full strength in terms of aircraft and pilots, but it was still sadly lacking in many support services – as the current exercise proved. The move by road to Wengerohr was only made possible by the requisitioning of a large number of civilian lorries and their drivers.

Nor did the *Gruppe*'s difficulties end there, for Wengerohr's grassy surface was softer and more uneven than Böblingen's hard-packed earth. There was a spate of minor take-off and landing accidents during I./JG 52's brief occupancy of the field, but fortunately no serious injuries to personnel.

The expedition to Wengerohr had obviously been designed to give von Pfeil's pilots and groundcrews a taste of operating on a war footing. The short-lived euphoria which had followed in the wake of the Munich Agreement had long since dissipated. In March 1939 Hitler's forces had occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. Now it was adopting an increasingly threatening posture towards Poland. The Western Allies' policy of appeasement – so desperately held (and so dearly bought, at the expense of others) in the past – had proven totally ineffective. War clouds were looming large, and the threat of hostilities was becoming more real with every passing day.

Among the many signs of the heightened tension in what were to prove to be the final weeks of peace was the hurried activation of a number of makeshift fighter units of *Gruppe* or *Staffel* strength. One of these was 11.(N)/JG 72 – an auxiliary nightfighter *Staffel* equipped with elderly

Routine patrols did not always end routinely. For whatever reason, the unknown pilot of I./JG 52's 'White 7' has pulled off a very neat belly landing, with the only apparent damage to his Bf 109E being a set of bent propeller blades



Arado Ar 68F biplanes. Commanded by Oberleutnant August-Wilhelm Schumann, it was activated at Böblingen alongside I./JG 52 on 15 July 1939.

On a more personal level, another minor, but significant, portent of things to come was the departure of a thoroughly disgruntled Adolf Galland. On 31 July he was posted back to the ground-attack arm, where he assumed command of 5.(Schl)/LG 2 – the Heinkel He 51 *Staffel* he would lead into action in the imminent campaign against Poland. His place at the head of I./JG 52 was taken by Oberleutnant Wilhelm Keidel.

The *Gruppe*'s last pre-war deployment was to Wangerooge, one of the Friesian islands off the northern coast of Germany above Wilhelmshaven. Here, pilots spent two weeks honing their dogfighting skills and perfecting their gunnery. An RAF fighter pilot who underwent a similar experience off the English coast was later famously to remark, after being ordered to fire at the wave tops, 'The North Sea wasn't all that difficult to hit!'

But as well as stalking and shooting at the shadows of each others' aircraft as they raced across the sun-dappled surface of the water, von Pfeil's pilots also enjoyed the additional luxury of a target drogue, towed by an ancient Junkers F 13, which they used to simulate beam attacks on enemy bombers. The pilots put in about two hours of hard flying every day, after which their time was pretty much their own. It did not take them long to discover the delights that the unspoilt holiday island of Wangerooge had to offer.

All too soon, however, it was back to business as usual. Shortly after I./JG 52's return to Böblingen in mid-August 1939, full mobilisation was ordered. Reservists were recalled, and the *Gruppe* prepared itself for the task of defending the Stuttgart area, and its many manufacturing plants – including the important Mercedes motor works – from possible bombing raids by the French.

Then, on 26 August, the *Gruppe* was suddenly ordered to move up to Bonn-Hangelar. I./JG 52's new role in the – now seemingly inevitable – event of hostilities was to be the aerial defence of the southern flank of the industrial Ruhr basin.

When von Pfeil's pilots finally departed Böblingen on 29 August (just 72 hours prior to Hitler's invasion of Poland), they left behind their last remaining Bf 109Ds. These were then used to re-equip Oberleutnant August-Wilhelm Schumann's 11.(N)/JG 72.

On that same date, 11.(N)/JG 72 was joined at Böblingen by another of the *Staffeln* hastily formed during the last weeks of peace. Activated as a day-fighter unit at Schleissheim in mid-July, 1./JG 71 had flirted briefly with ex-Czech air force Avia B 534s, before itself quickly converting to the Bf 109D. By an odd coincidence, 1./JG 71 was also commanded by a Schumann – Oberleutnant Heinz Schumann.

It was intended that the two Böblingen-based *Staffeln* (11./JG 72 having been relieved of its quasi-nocturnal duties) should form two-thirds the strength of the planned new II./JG 52. In the event, the outbreak of hostilities on 1 September seems to have put the creation of a second *Gruppe* temporarily on hold. For the first fortnight of the war, the two *Staffeln* operated in a kind of administrative limbo. Some sources refer to 1./JG 71 and 11./JG 72 as the 4. and 5. *Staffeln* respectively of the embryonic II./JG 52. The units themselves appear to have continued using their original designations. Given the common name shared by the

two *Staffelkapitäne*, others got round the problem quite simply by referring to the pair collectively as the '*Jagdgruppe* Schumann'!

Plans had also been drawn up in the third week of August 1939 for the establishment at Böblingen of a *Geschwaderstab* JG 52 to be commanded by Major Hubert Merhart von Bernegg, hitherto *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 53. But these too appear to have been performed delayed by the attack on Poland. It was not until the latter half of September that Major von Bernegg's *Stab* took its place as part of the *Westwall* defences – by which time Great Britain and France had declared war on Germany, and the first clashes between the *Luftwaffe* and the *Armée de l'Air* had already taken place.

SITZKRIEG

The invasion of Poland was some 54 hours old when first the British, and then the French, declarations of war on Germany were announced on 3 September 1939. The ensuing autumn and winter months have since been dismissed by many as the *Sitzkrieg*, or Phoney War.

There was more than a grain of truth in these somewhat derogatory terms as far as ground operations were concerned. The majority of French and German troops sat phlegmatically in their respective fortifications, each side waiting for the other to make its move. Members of the newly arrived British Expeditionary Force (BEF) complained that they were spending more time labouring than soldiering, as they dug earthworks and poured concrete along the Belgian border.

But in the air it was a different story. Weather permitting, both sides mounted fighter patrols and sent up reconnaissance sorties to probe and gauge each other's defences. Such activity was mainly local, however, and contact with the enemy was at first the exception rather than the rule.

Although taken in the spring of 1940, this snapshot captures perfectly the sense of boredom felt throughout much of the *Sitzkrieg* period. Whiling away the time in front of I. *Gruppe*'s ops hut, Oberleutnant Carl Lommel, Kapitän of 1. *Staffel*, is engrossed in a newspaper. Behind him, Leutnant Robert Göbel appears more interested in the shine on his boots! As *Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 52 in Russia, Oberleutnant Göbel would be killed in a Soviet night bombing raid on the unit's forward landing ground at Grakovo on 25 June 1942



At Bonn-Hangelar, for example, I./JG 52 had little to show for its first month of routine border patrolling.

It thus fell to the *'Jagdgruppe Schumann'* at Böblingen – or, more specifically, to Leutnant Paul Gutbrod of 11./JG 72 – to score the very first of the more than 10,000 aerial victories which would be credited to JG 52 before the final German surrender six years hence.

On the evening of 6 September, Leutnant Gutbrod and his wingman were patrolling the Rhine south of Karlsruhe when they spotted a 'high-winged monoplane' apparently attempting to strafe the bridge at Kehl. As soon as it became aware of the approaching fighters, the enemy machine – a two-seater Mureaux ANF 115 reconnaissance aircraft – broke off and headed back towards the French side of the river. Before it could escape, Gutbrod was able to get in two firing passes from astern, the second of which caused the Mureaux to break up in mid-air.

This hapless Frenchman (ANF 115 No 14 of the Sarrebourg-based GAO 553) was not just the opening entry on JG 52's previously virgin scoresheet, it also provided the Luftwaffe with its first western front aerial victory of the war.

Four weeks to the day after Leutnant Gutbrod's success – which had earned him the Iron Cross, 2nd Class – it was the turn of I./JG 52 to claim another French reconnaissance intruder.

Shortly after midday on 6 October, one of the first of the *Armée de l'Air's* brand new LeO 451 twin-engined bombers was ordered to carry out a



When 1./JG 71 became 4./JG 52 and swapped its Avia B 534s for Bf 109s, it introduced a new *Staffel* badge. In place of the 'winged red devil', which had adorned the rear fuselages of the ex-Czech air force biplanes, the unit now opted for a black arched cat – either on a soft-sprayed background as here, or on a solid white disc. And while on the subject of white, note the unknown pilot's fetching pre-war flying helmet!



Occasionally – very occasionally – the tranquility of the *Sitzkrieg* would be shattered by contact with the enemy, and then a kill. This happened just twice to I./JG 52. The first time was on 6 October 1939 when 2. *Staffel*'s Leutnant Hans Berthel chased and destroyed a French Leo 451 . . .

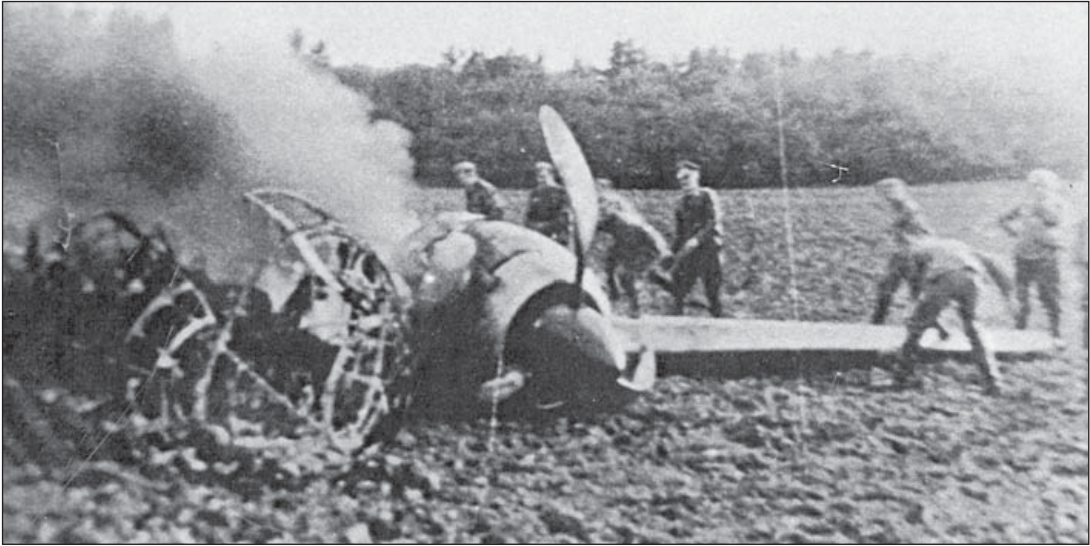
hazardous solo reconnaissance mission deep into German airspace to gather intelligence on Luftwaffe defences south of the Ruhr. It was against just such an eventuality that I./JG 52 had been transferred up to Bonn-Hangelar. And it was also the reason why the *Gruppe* – in addition to its frequent patrols – kept at least one *Schwarm* of (four) fighters at constant cockpit readiness.

In the event, when the first reports of the lone intruder began to come in from the ground observers, two *Schwärme* were immediately scrambled to intercept it. One of the eight pilots, Leutnant Hans Berthel – who had occupied the No 9 slot in Germany's pre-war national aerobatic team, and now regularly flew as wingman to Oberleutnant Wolfgang Ewald, *Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 52 – takes up the story (translated from the original German by kind permission of Herr Axel Paul, co-author of *Vom Feindflug nicht zurückgekehrt* – see bibliography);

'I was reputed to have the best eyes in the *Staffel*. After we had been flying a little while, I was therefore the first – well before my comrades –

. . . seen here burning furiously after attempting a wheels-down landing in a field near Wachendorf, southwest of Bonn. After rescuing the injured crew, the onlookers (background left) at first kept a respectful distance from the blazing machine . . .





to spot the tiny speck of an aircraft in the far distance. It wasn't long before I was able to identify it as a French LeO 451 bomber. I reported the fact over the R/T, but my sighting was received with some scepticism. I discovered later that none of my comrades had believed me!

'All of us, friend and foe alike, were flying between two layers of cloud. The Frenchman was also on the ball, and he caught sight of me as soon as I curved in towards him. The pilot immediately put his nose down and went into a steep dive, trying to reach the protection of the lower cloud layer. I decided to follow him down, even if it did mean flying blind, for which my "Red 1" was not equipped.

'Luckily, I did not have to fly blind for long. When I broke through the cloud and had clear visibility again, I was absolutely amazed to find the Frenchman almost right in front of me, just off to one side. We were, at most, 100 metres (330 ft) above the fields flashing past beneath us.

'The enemy rear-gunner spotted me at once and quickly opened fire. Fortunately, he did not hit me – I say fortunately because in all the excitement – it was, after all, the first time I had ever *seen* the enemy,

... but later approached the still smouldering wreckage to pick over the pieces ...



... among the items retrieved was the LeO's port rudder, which made a very nice trophy for the *Staffel's Kasino* (officers' mess) ...



... while outside in its wooded dispersal pen, Berthel's 'Red 1' was decorated with the unit's very first victory bar

let alone finding myself being shot at – I was frantically pushing and pulling every available button and lever in the cockpit in an effort to release the safety catches and charge my guns. In the process, I even managed to switch my lights on. They remained on until I landed, leading to the usual witty remarks from my comrades for a long time afterwards.

‘In reality, it can only have been a matter of seconds until my guns were ready to fire, although at the time it seemed like an eternity.

‘My first burst of fire hit one of the Frenchman’s engines, which immediately burst into flames. The pilot of the LeO promptly lowered his undercarriage – a somewhat unusual and dangerous move to make prior to an emergency landing. In this instance, it was particularly dangerous for me! The undercarriage immediately broke up on contact with the soft ground. Bits and pieces flew through the air, missing my “Red 1” by a hair’s breadth as – with my excess of speed – I zoomed low across the path of the careering Frenchman. What would have happened if the wheel that narrowly missed my cockpit had actually hit me? Even if it had only resulted in a slight dent, it would have taken a long while to live down the inevitable jokes from my comrades.

‘By chance, Major Gotthard Handrick, winner of the modern pentathlon in the 1936 Berlin Olympics and himself a fighter pilot (currently *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./JG 26, based at Bonn-Odendorf) happened to be in Wachendorf (17 miles (28 km) southwest of Bonn) at the time. Alarmed by the loud noise of the engines, he had witnessed the combat from the ground. He officially confirmed the kill, or at least later described the whole event – including the LeO’s emergency landing – to my own *Kommandeur*.

‘I remained on the scene for some time, orbiting and watching the burning French machine. Then my circling was abruptly terminated by a radio message. Control was reporting the presence of several English fighters over the Eifel hills. Fired up by the spirit of the chase, we turned on to the given heading and set off to find the *Engländer*. But we could discover no trace of them and, after spending some time searching, returned to Hangelar.’

By this first week of October 1939, Maj von Bernegg’s *Geschwaderstab* and the new II./JG 52 were both fully established at Böblingen on Bf 109Es. The latter, commanded by Hauptmann Horst-Günter von Kornatzki (later to achieve fame as the originator of the *Sturmjäger* concept), had been brought up to full strength by the activation of a 6. *Staffel*, headed by Oberleutnant Werner Lederer. Meanwhile, any lingering confusion surrounding the common surname shared by the *Kapitäne* of 4. and 5./JG 52 was overcome by referring to the pair, informally at least, in terms best translated as ‘Lofty’ Schumann and ‘Shorty’ Schumann, respectively!

Exactly a week after Hans Berthel’s LeO 451 victory, Leutnant Kurt Kirchner of I./JG 52 claimed I. *Gruppe*’s second, and last, success of the *Sitzkrieg* period. His victim would also prove to be the sole RAF machine downed by JG 52 prior to the invasion of France the following spring. It was one of a trio of Blenheim IVs from No 114 Sqn despatched on 12 October from their home base at Wyton, in the UK, to Villeneuve les Vertus, east of Paris, which currently housed the Fairey Battles of No 105 Sqn. From here, the Blenheims were to participate in a special long-range