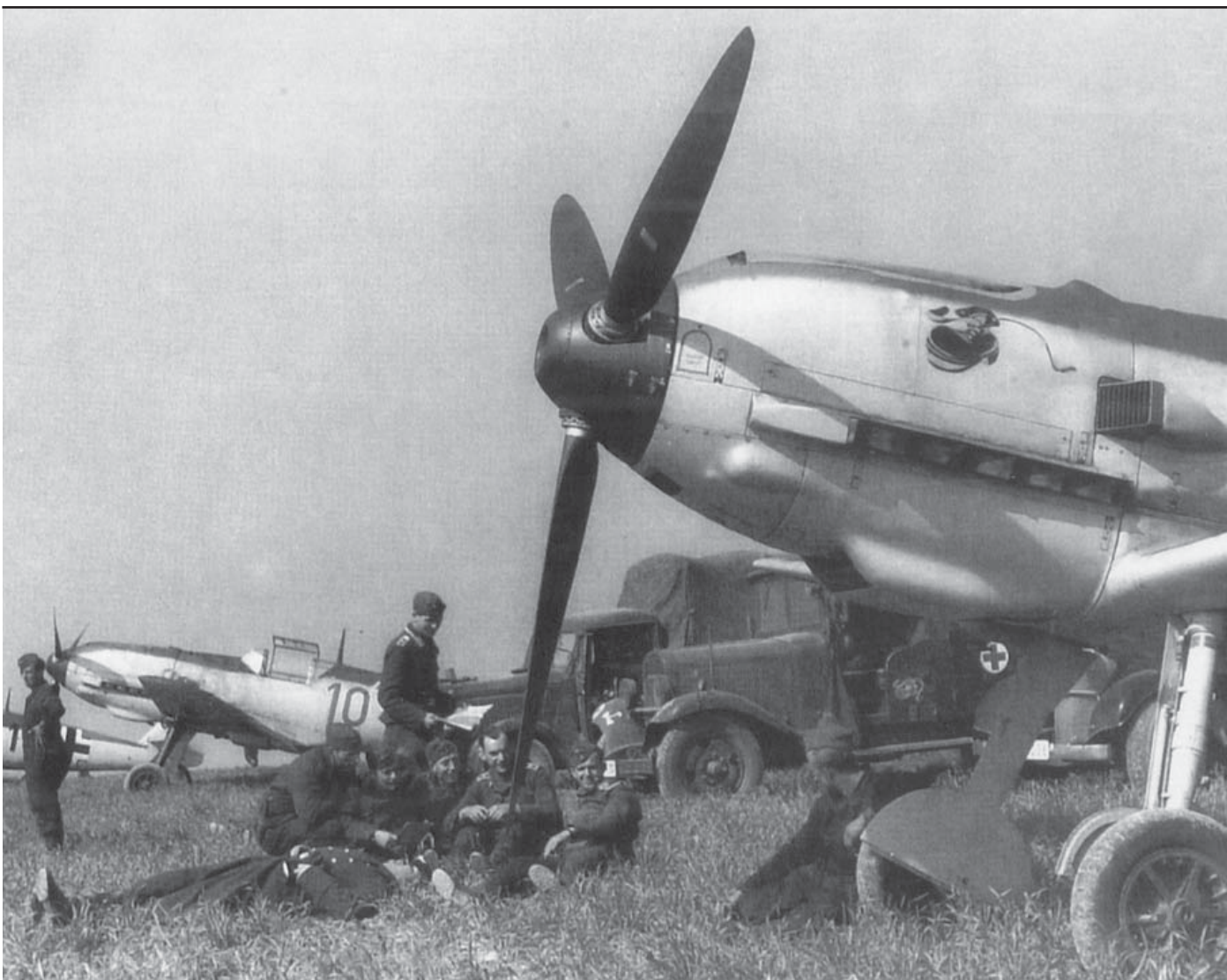


Jagdgeschwader 51 'Mölders'



John Weal

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Series editor Tony Holmes

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FORMATION AND PHONEY WAR

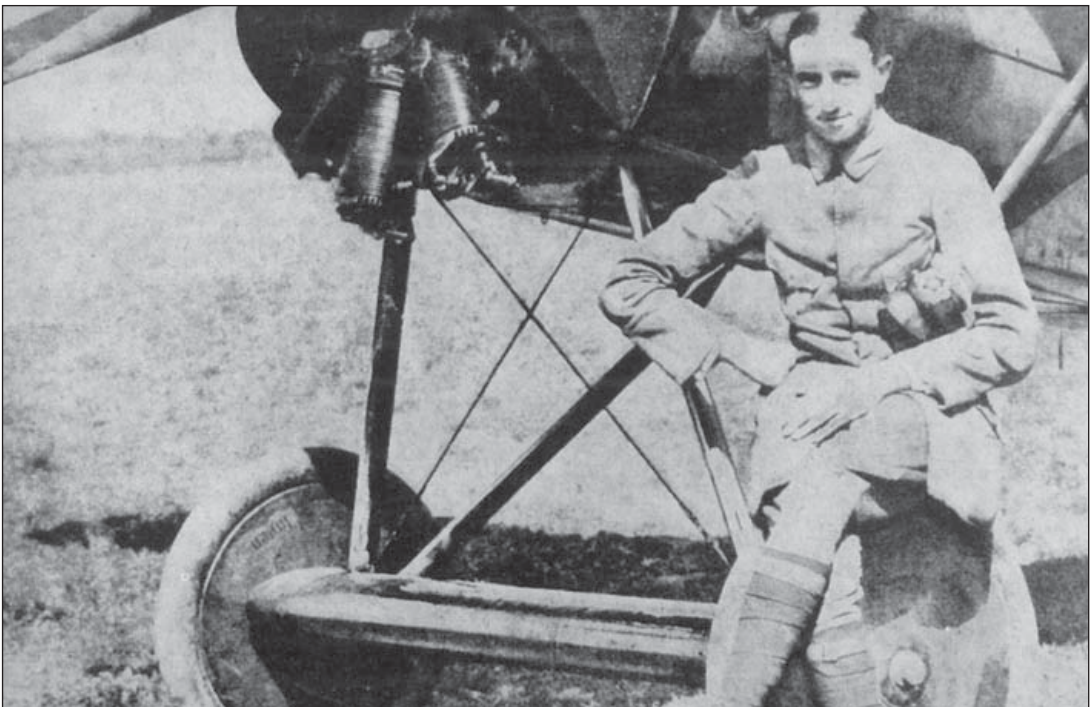
Many of the early fighter pilots, both Allied and enemy, who survived World War 1 subsequently went on to serve their countries once again in World War 2.

Most of those who chose, and were selected, to remain in the services during the intervening years (which, for the German veterans, would mean first being accepted into the 100,000-man standing army permitted by the post-World War 1 Treaty of Versailles, and then transferring to the covert air arm of the Weimar Republic before the emergence of the Luftwaffe proper in 1935) had risen to high rank and positions of authority, and command, by the outbreak of World War 2.

In contrast, the majority of those who had opted, or had been obliged, to return to civilian life in the aftermath of the first conflict, but who then answered their country's call to arms by rejoining the ranks upon the outbreak of fresh hostilities in September 1939, often fought their second war from behind humbler desks.

Very few from either category managed to get back on operations and fly combat missions in both world wars. Fewer still claimed ace status in both conflicts, and were honoured in each with the highest decoration their nation could then bestow. One such, however, was Theodor Osterkamp.

A youthful Theodor Osterkamp perches on the wheel of his Fokker D VIII in Flanders in the late summer of 1918



One of Osterkamp's pre-war commands was II./JG 134, which he activated on 15 March 1936. Here, in full parade uniform, complete with early-pattern steel helmet and bouquet of flowers tucked into his brocade waist-belt, Major Osterkamp (centre) prepares to lead his *Gruppe* in its first ceremonial march-past through the unit's home town of Werl on 7 April 1936. Similarly attired to their *Kommandeur* are (left) Oberleutnant Walter Kienzle and (right) Leutnant Werner Mölders



On the outbreak of World War 2, the now Oberstleutnant Osterkamp was commanding *Jagdfliegerschule 1* at Werneuchen. Again in full rig, with the *Pour le Mérite* prominent at his throat, the benign and avuncular Osterkamp was by this time known throughout the *Luftwaffe* as 'Onkel Theo'



Born in Düren, in the Rhineland, on 15 April 1892, Osterkamp – universally known as Theo – volunteered for the Imperial Navy's newly established *Marine-Fliegerkorps* within days of the outbreak of World War 1 in August 1914. After training, he was to spend nearly three years as an observer, before remustering as a pilot and joining I. *Marine-Feldjagdstaffel* (1st Naval Land-based Fighter Squadron) at Aertryke, in Flanders, on his 25th birthday.

Flying the Albatros D III, Leutnant *der Reserve* Osterkamp claimed his first aerial victory over Steenbrügge on 28 April 1917. A year later he was appointed leader of II. *Marine-Feldjagdstaffel*, and on 2 September 1918 – with his score standing at 27 – he was awarded the *Pour le Mérite*, or 'Blue Max'. Adding five more kills to his total in the final two months of the conflict, Osterkamp ended the war as Germany's highest scoring Naval Air Service fighter pilot.

There followed a brief stint as a member of the *Kampfgeschwader 'Sachsenberg'*, which was a volunteer unit set up to fight the Bolsheviks in Courland in 1919. However, by the beginning of 1920, like so many other ex-servicemen, Theo Osterkamp found himself demobilised and with a living to make as a civilian.

Despite forging a successful career as a car salesman, Osterkamp's first love remained flying. And when, in 1926, the offer of a job with the firm of Severa came along, he jumped at it. Operating floatplanes out of Kiel-Holtenau, and ostensibly formed to undertake civilian charter work, Severa also flew under contract for the German Navy, carrying out target-towing duties during fleet anti-aircraft gunnery exercises, artillery spotting and other ancillary tasks. From activities such as these, it was but a short step back into the military proper. And again Osterkamp needed little persuasion to make the change. He joined the still covert *Luftwaffe* on 1 August 1933 with the rank of *hauptmann*.

By the time war broke out in September 1939 Osterkamp had risen to the rank of *oberstleutnant*, and was commanding JFS 1 – the fighter pilot school at Werneuchen, northeast of Berlin. It was from here that he was ordered to Münster-Loddenheide to set up *Jagdgeschwader 51*.

Formally activated on 25 November 1939, the now Oberst Osterkamp's new unit thus became the third of the five *Jagdgeschwader* to

The 1 October 1938 issue of *Flying* magazine devoted a page to the German annexation of Austria seven months earlier. The heading photograph is captioned, 'Modern German fighters on Askern (sic) Aerodrome, Vienna'. In fact, as their fuselage codes indicate, these are He 51s of 3./JG 135, which was . . .



be added to the Luftwaffe's order of battle during the eight months of the Phoney War. The *Stäbe* of JGs 27 and 77 had both been established on 1 October 1939, that of JG 1 followed on 8 December, and the last, *Stab* JG 54, came into being on 1 February 1940.

As yet, however, Oberst Osterkamp had only two component *Gruppen* to his organisational name, and even these were subordinated to other *Stäbe*. The first, currently based at Mannheim-Sandhofen under the control of JG 52, was Hauptmann Hans-Heinrich Brustellin's I./JG 51. This *Gruppe* could trace its history back nearly three years.

It was on 15 March 1937 that the then I./JG 135 had begun forming on He 51s. As the first *Jagdgruppe* to be activated within the area of *Luftkreis* (Air Region) V, which covered almost all of southern Germany, it took up residence on the still unfinished airfield at Bad Aibling, close to the Austrian border to the southeast of Munich.

Initially comprising just two *Staffeln*, I./JG 135, commanded by Major Max Ibel, was brought up to full establishment with the creation of a 3. *Staffel* under Oberleutnant Hans-Heinrich Brustellin on 1 July 1937. Towards the end of the year 3./JG 135's colourful Heinkel biplanes – each trimmed, appropriately enough, in the blue-and-white colours of Bavaria



– were replaced by Bf 109Bs wearing a more purposeful dark-green segmented camouflage finish. There were plans for the other two *Staffeln* to similarly re-equip early in 1938, but these were put on hold by the *Führer's* decision to incorporate the land of his birth into the new Greater German Reich.

I./JG 135 was the only *Jagdgruppe* to be directly involved in Hitler's annexation of Austria on 12 March 1938 (although other units were to carry out 'demonstration flights' once the territories had been secured). From their base at Bad Aibling, hard by the Austrian border, Major Ibel's three *Staffeln* were each despatched to a different destination. Not surprisingly perhaps, it was 3./JG 135 – the only one equipped with Bf 109s – that was selected to cover the two *Gruppen* of Ju 52/3m transports flying the main body of German troops into Wien (Vienna)-Aspern airfield on the northeastern outskirts of the Austrian capital. Shortly afterwards, the He 51s of 1. and 2. *Staffeln* put down at Hörsching, near Linz, and Gross-Enzersdorf, east of Vienna, respectively.

Despite numerous post-war assertions to the contrary, in 1938 the vast majority of the Austrian population – general public and establishment alike – welcomed their German neighbours as ex-brothers in arms, rather than as occupying foreign troops. The small, but highly-trained, Austrian army and air force were quickly assimilated into the Wehrmacht, and the Heinkels of 1. and 2./JG 135, their presence no longer required, were soon recalled to Bad Aibling.

3./JG 135's Messerschmitts, however, were to remain in the *Ostmark* – or 'Eastern Marches', as Austria was renamed during its seven year existence as part of Hitler's Third Reich. On 14 March 1938, just 48 hours after touching down at Wien-Aspern, Oberleutnant Brustellin's

... the *only* *Staffel* of I./JG 135 to have re-equipped with early model Bf 109s prior to the annexation. Here, the *Bertas* of 3. *Staffel* share the apron in front of the hangar of the Austrian Air Force's *Fliegerregiment* I with Do 17s of II./KG 155 on the day the Luftwaffe flew in to Aspern – 12 March 1938

Staffel was redesignated as I./JG 138 – the premier *Staffel* of a new Luftwaffe *Jagdgruppe* otherwise made up entirely of hitherto Austrian *Luftstreitkräfte* personnel (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units 6 - Jagdgeschwader 54 'Grünherz'* for further details).

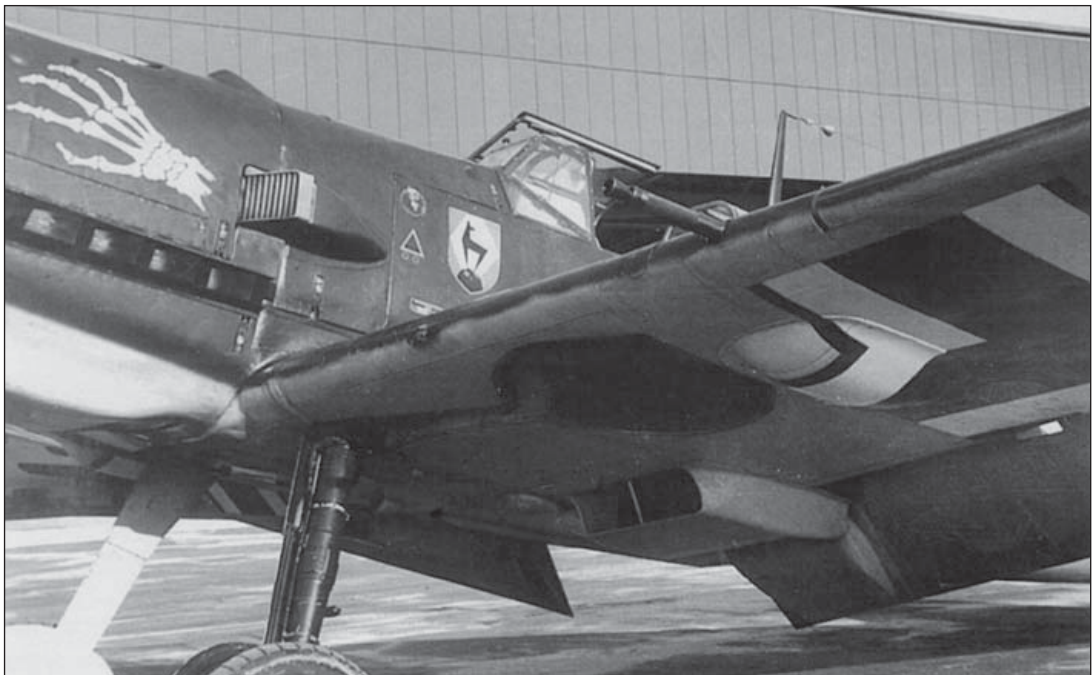
In exchange, an ex-Austrian *Staffel*, 5./JaGeschw II, commanded by Leutnant Erich Gerlitz and flying Fiat CR.32bis fighters, was transferred to Bad Aibling on 15 April to fill I./JG 135's now vacant third *Staffel* slot.

During the summer of 1938 all three of Ibel's *Staffeln* standardised on early Bf 109Ds. But further changes were afoot, for on 31 October Max Ibel departed to take over as *Kommodore* of JG 231 (later to become the wartime JG 3). He was replaced by Major Ernst *Freiherr* von Berg, whose arrival on 1 November 1938 coincided with the *Gruppe's* re-numbering as I./JG 233. The unit's new designation was brought about by the Luftwaffe's recent command restructuring from *Luftkreise* into *Luftwaffengruppenkommandos*. It indicated that the Bad Aibling *Gruppe* now formed part of the second *Jagdgeschwader* to be based in the area controlled by *Lw.Kdo 3*.

This cumbersome three-figure nomenclature was not to last long, however. On 1 May 1939 the introduction of a greatly simplified block designation system resulted in Major Berg's *Gruppe* emerging as I./JG 51, the premier *Jagdgruppe* of the new *Luftflotte 3*. At the same time the unit was busy converting from its original Bf 109Ds on to the latest E-models.

By now the war clouds were gathering ominously. In the summer of 1939, with Austria and Czechoslovakia already under his belt, Hitler's attention was focused firmly on Poland. Germany's *Führer* was not merely willing, but positively eager, to use force to subjugate his eastern neighbour. But he was uncertain how Britain and France would react if he attacked Poland. As a precaution, he ordered the strengthening of the aerial defences along the Reich's western borders.

Pictured at Mannheim-Sandhofen in the autumn of 1939, this pristine Emil of 3./JG 51 displays both the *Staffel's* (short-lived) 'Skeleton hand' emblem on the cowling and the new, more stylised 'Chamois on a mountain peak' I. *Gruppe* shield below the windscreen





The two pilots who scored I./JG 51's first aerial victories when they destroyed a French 'P-36' apiece near Weissenburg on 25 September 1939 – Oberleutnant Douglas Pitcairn (left), the *Kapitän* of 1. *Staffel*, and Unteroffizier Heinz Bär

Among the *Jagdgruppen* moved to the frontier with France was I./JG 51. On 26 August 1939 the unit departed Bad Aibling, its home base for the past two-and-a-half years, for Eutingen, southwest of Stuttgart, where it was subordinated to the *Stab* of JG 52 at nearby Böblingen. Six days later Hitler invaded Poland, and 48 hours after that, on 3 September 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

I./JG 51 would spend the first two months of the Phoney War with its 40+ Bf 109Es divided between Eutingen and Speyer – the latter a field close to the Rhine south of Mannheim. It was during this period that the *Gruppe* gained its first three successes.

On 25 September elements of I./JG 51 were part of a mixed force of Bf 109s sent up to intercept a heavily escorted French reconnaissance Potez on its way to photograph German border defences around Bad Bergzabern, west of Karlsruhe. The enemy formations were spotted without difficulty, and shortly after midday six *Emils* of 1. *Staffel* succeeded in bouncing the reconnaissance machine's top cover, claiming the destruction of two Curtiss Hawk H-75As (which they identified as P-36s) near Weissenburg.

The first French fighter fell to the guns of Oberleutnant Douglas Pitcairn, who had taken over from Oberleutnant Hannes Trautloft as *Kapitän* of I./JG 51 back in July 1938. The second was credited to one of

Pitcairn's more promising NCO pilots, Unteroffizier Heinz Bär (one of the *Jagdwaaffe's* future 'greats', who would end the war flying Me 262 jets and with a final score of 221 confirmed victories).

Exactly three weeks later, on 16 October, Hauptmann Erich Gerlitz, *Staffelkapitän* of the ex-Austrian 3./JG 51, claimed a French Potez 63 south of Kaiserslautern. On the debit side, the *Gruppe* paid for these first three victories with the loss of a single 2. *Staffel* pilot who had been captured after forced landing behind French lines on 28 September.

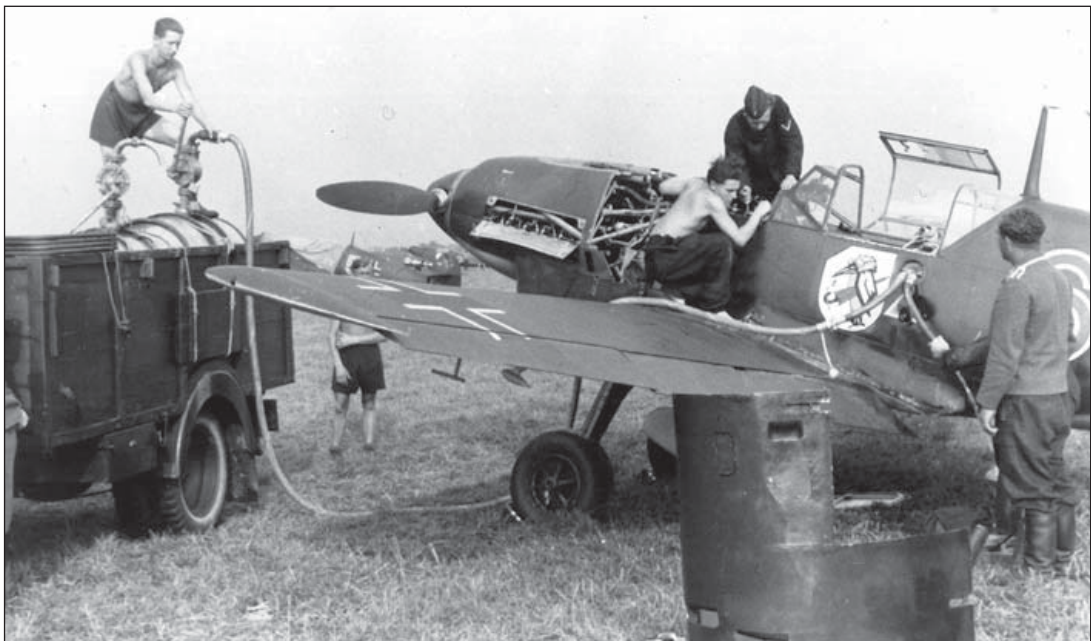
Towards the end of October 1939 I./JG 51 was transferred to Mannheim-Sandhofen. Shortly after this move there was another change of command. On 31 October Major Ernst *Freiherr* von Berg was appointed *Kommandeur* of III./JG 26. His replacement was Hauptmann Hans-Heinrich Brustellin, erstwhile *Staffelkapitän* of the original Bf 109B-equipped 3./JG 135 at the time of the annexation of Austria.

The *Gruppe* would remain at Mannheim-Sandhofen under the control of JG 52 throughout the harsh winter of 1939-40. During this period its pilots accounted for four more French aircraft, but saw another two of their own number enter captivity after coming down over enemy territory. They also suffered their first two operational fatalities in take-off and emergency landing accidents.

In the meantime a second *Gruppe*, II./JG 51, had been brought into being. This unit was derived from one of the four individual *Jagdgruppen* that had been hurriedly set up in the final weeks prior to the outbreak of war. In the event, I./JG 71 consisted of only two *Staffeln*, commanded by Oberleutnants Heinz Schumann and Josef Fözö respectively.

Activated at Schleissheim on 15 July 1939 (around cadres provided by I./JG 51), 1. and 2./JG 71, both equipped with Bf 109Ds, transferred to Bad Aibling 11 days later. Here they spent a month working up alongside two reserve *Staffeln*, one likewise flying D-1s, the other operating ex-Czech Air Force Avia B 534 biplanes.

Bf 109D 'Red 6' of Oberleutnant Josef Fözö's 2./JG 71 is refuelled and re-armed shortly before the outbreak of war. The *Staffel's* 'weeping raven' emblem, seen here below the cockpit, would subsequently be moved to the aft fuselage, embellished with the exhortation 'Gott strafe England', and used as the badge of II./JG 51



On 26 August (the day I./JG 51 vacated Bad Aibling for Eutingen) the three Messerschmitt *Staffeln* were ordered to move to Fürstenfeldbruck to help bolster the aerial defences of Munich. Seventy-two hours later Oberleutnant Schumann's 1./JG 71 was detached and sent further north to Böblingen, near Stuttgart. These were the *Staffeln's* dispositions upon the outbreak of hostilities on 1 September. But on that same date came the parting of the ways when 1./JG 71 was redesignated 4./JG 52.

After two months at Fürstenfeldbruck, during which time they converted from Bf 109Ds to Es, the other two *Staffeln* transferred to Eutingen on 28 October. And it was here, on 1 November 1939, that II./JG 51 was formally activated.

A *Gruppenstab* was set up under Major Ernst-Günther Burggaller, who had been a member of the 'Richthofen' *Geschwader* in World War 1. After making a name for himself as a highly successful motor racing driver in the inter-war years, he rejoined the Luftwaffe, where he had been serving latterly as the *Staffelkapitän* of 1./JG 2 'Richthofen'. Oberleutnant Josef Fözö's 2./JG 71 became 4./JG 51, while the hitherto *Reservestaffel*/JG 71 – led by Hauptmann Horst Tietzen, a veteran of the *Legion Condor* with seven victories to his credit – was redesignated as 5./JG 51.

A new 6. *Staffel* had to be created from scratch, with Oberleutnant Josef Priller, the NO (Communications Officer) of I./JG 51, being brought in from Mannheim-Sandhofen to assume command as its first *Kapitän*.

During the depths of the winter of 1939-40 II./JG 51 remained at Eutingen, with detachments being rotated to Friedrichshafen, on the shores of Lake Constance, where they enjoyed a welcome respite from the worst of the weather by being housed in one of the field's cavernous Zeppelin airship sheds. Throughout this period the *Gruppe* saw little or no operational activity. It claimed no successes and suffered just one casualty, Major Burggaller being killed when he struck the ground during a low-level flight west of Friedrichshafen on 2 February 1940.

A week later, under its new *Kommandeur*, Hauptmann Günther Matthes (previously the *Gruppen-Adjutant*), II./JG 51 was ordered to Böblingen. Until now the *Gruppe* had been subordinated directly to various regional commands. At Böblingen, which would be its base for the final three months of the Phoney War, II./JG 51 would come under the control of *Stab* JG 54, whose task was the defence of the southernmost (Upper Rhine) sector of Germany's border with France.

This period saw the opening of the *Gruppe's* scoreboard with three victories all within the space of one week. The first of these was a tethered observation balloon shot down in flames over the French bank of the Rhine to the southeast of Colmar by Oberleutnant Josef Fözö on 16 April.

This was not some kind of frivolous pastime as might at first appear. After nearly eight months of stalemate along the western front, such observation balloons played an important role in monitoring enemy activity. They were sited at strategically sensitive locations, and each was ringed by its own strong anti-aircraft defences. Consequently, the destruction of such a balloon was no easy matter, and rated at this time on a par with the downing of an enemy aircraft. Fözö's victim therefore took pride of place at the head of II./JG 51's score-sheet. It also enabled the *Kapitän* of 4. *Staffel* to shave off the luxurious beard he had been growing, and which he had sworn to keep until the *Gruppe* achieved its first victory!

Four days after the demise of the balloon, Hauptmann Horst Tietzen, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 51, claimed his first victory of World War 2 to add to the seven he had scored in Spain. His adversary, a French Bloch MB 174 reconnaissance machine (misidentified as a Potez 63), went down some 30 miles inside German territory.

Twenty-four hours later, on 21 April 1940, the *Gruppe* caught another reconnaissance intruder well inside German airspace. This time it was a Spitfire PR IA of the RAF. A half-dozen *Emils* intercepted the Spitfire as it overflew their own Böblingen base, the Bf 109s overhauling their unsuspecting opponent from directly astern, using the enemy's contrail to hide their approach. When a burst of fire struck the Spitfire's engine, the pilot immediately reefed into a turn, hoping to get back to the safety of the French side of the Rhine. But it was not to be. After further attacks the engine finally gave out altogether, and Flg Off Cecil Milne was forced to bale out south of Stuttgart 'after first putting the machine into a steep dive to destroy its camera equipment'.

By this time Oberst Osterkamp's *Geschwaderstab* JG 51 had been declared operational. During the closing weeks of December 1939, two new commands had been set up to oversee all fighter activity along the western front. The two air fleets facing the western allies – *Luftflotte 2* along the northern sector of the front and *Luftflotte 3* in the south – had each established its own internal *Jagdfliegerführer* (literally 'Fighter-leader', more commonly abbreviated to *Jafü*) for the purpose.

On 1 January 1940 *Stab* JG 51 had been subordinated to *Jafü 2*, Generalmajor Kurt-Bertram von Döring, whose headquarters were situated at Dortmund, in the Ruhr. And on 12 February Osterkamp and his *Stab* were ordered forward from Münster to Bönninghardt, close to the Dutch border.

Bönninghardt also housed I./JG 26 and I./JG 20. But whereas the former would soon revert to the control of its parent *Geschwader*, and thus has only a passing role to play in the present narrative, I./JG 20 forms an

***Emils* of 1./JG 20 at rest on the grassy expanse of Brandenburg-Briest. The air of tranquility is deceptive. Hostilities have already been declared . . .**



integral part of the history of JG 51 (it would be redesignated III./JG 51 after the successful conclusion of the forthcoming campaign against France).

I./JG 20 was another of the four *Jagdgruppen* that had been activated immediately prior to the outbreak of war. And, like I./JG 71, it too had consisted initially of only two *Staffeln*. Formed at Döberitz on 15 July 1939 from cadres drawn mainly from JG 2, the *Gruppe's* first *Kommandeur* was Major Siegfried Lehmann, who had previously headed the *Fliegerwaffenschule* (Air Weapons School) at Stolp-Reitz, in Pomerania. The *Kapitän* of Lehmann's 1. and 2./JG 20 were ex-*Legion Condor* veterans Oberleutnants Walter Oesau and Albrecht *Freiherr* von Minnigerode respectively, both of whom came from the *Stab* of I./JG 2.

On 26 August I./JG 20 was transferred from Döberitz to Strausberg, on the other (eastern) side of Berlin. Six days later, when Hitler invaded Poland, the *Gruppe* moved down to Sprottau, in Lower Silesia. Here, its 20+ Bf 109Es were tasked with protecting the area's many industrial targets from attack by the Polish Air Force. But the enemy's bombers never came. After an uneventful week, I./JG 20 was ordered back up to Brandenburg-Briest on 9 September.

During the two months the *Gruppe* was to remain at Brandenburg-Briest, near Berlin, it experienced both a change of command and an increase in size to a full three-*Staffel* establishment. On 18 September Major Lehmann returned to Stolp-Reitz to become *Kommandeur* of the *Jagdfliegerschule* (Fighter Pilot School) newly established there. His replacement at the head of I./JG 20 was Hauptmann Hannes Trautloft, ex-*Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 77. And on 1 November a 3. *Staffel* was set up under Oberleutnant Richard Kraut.

3./JG 20 had, in fact, been activated at Döberitz, and the rest of the *Gruppe* joined it there from Briest six days later. Up until this time, I./JG 20 had been operating under the control of *Stab* JG 2. For the next three winter months spent at Döberitz it would be subordinated to *Stab*

... and the pilot of 'White 3' is settling himself into the cockpit for another defensive patrol of the Greater Berlin area. This close-up shows to advantage the *Staffel's* 'bow and arrow' emblem, as well as the machine's two-tone dark green/black green splinter finish

