

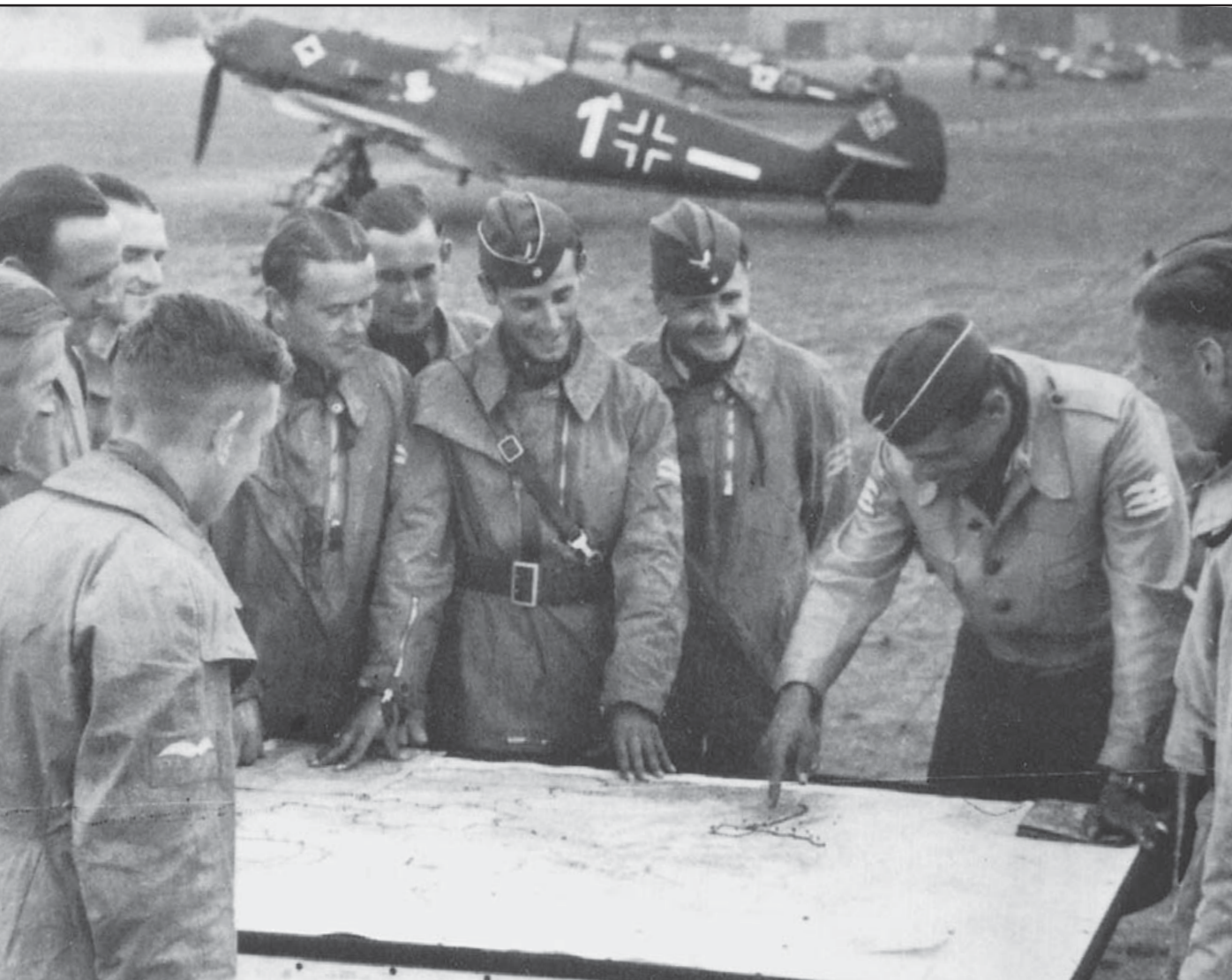
Jagdgeschwader 53 *'Pik-As'*



John Weal

Jagdgeschwader 53

'Pik As'



John Weal

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EARLY DAYS

Very few, if any, of the world's major air arms have made such abundant use of unit heraldry as did the German Luftwaffe of World War 2. The designs chosen – in the main by the units themselves – ran the whole gamut from the overtly political, through the geographical, the ornithological and the vaguely scatological, right down to the heavy-handedly comical.

Nearly a thousand such emblems have been recorded, although many remain unidentified to this day. But there is one example that is arguably far more familiar to the general public than any other. It has been supplied in decal form with numerous plastic model kits, it has been featured in countless comic books and it is an almost *de rigueur* decoration on any German 'fighter' (such as repainted T-6 Texans and the like) brought to the silver screen by Hollywood.

In effect, it has become a form of visual shorthand as the almost universally accepted symbol of the wartime Luftwaffe. It is, of course, the strikingly simple 'Pik-As', or 'Ace of Spades'.

But what of the unit that actually carried this famous device on its machines from the opening weeks of World War 2 until the final day of surrender?

The story begins on 15 March 1937. This was the date that saw the simultaneous activation of a *Stab* (HQ) and the first two *Gruppen* of a completely new *Jagdgeschwader*, JG 334, in the Rhine-Main area of western Germany.

The officer selected to command the unit was Oberst Bruno Loerzer, a long-time friend of Hermann Göring. The two had met early in World War 1 when Loerzer was training to be a pilot and Göring was serving in an infantry regiment. It was Loerzer who prompted Göring to transfer to the air arm. And it was Loerzer who piloted the future Reichsmarschall during the latter's first operational tour as a back-seat observer and photographer in the spring and early summer of 1915.

The two young lieutenants made a formidable team. Each was awarded the Iron Cross, First Class, in the field for their combined efforts in obtaining vital reconnaissance photographs of French fortifications around Verdun. For three days they cruised low over the chain of enemy forts, Loerzer skidding the two-seat Albatros about the sky while Göring hung far out over the side and calmly and methodically shot away with his camera.

Both subsequently retrained as fighter pilots, and ended the war in

Good friends, and a highly successful reconnaissance crew in the early months of World War 1, it would appear that a quarter of a century later – towards the end of the Battle of Britain – relations between the then *General der Flieger* Bruno Loerzer, GOC II. *Fliegerkorps* (left), and his C-in-C, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, were no longer quite so cordial





Oberst Loerzer's JG 334 was first equipped with the Arado Ar 68E. The overall pale grey machines displayed no kind of coloured trim as an aid to *Geschwader* identification. Some sources suggest that 1. *Staffel*'s 'White 6', pictured here at Frankfurt-Rebstock, was the mount of future *Experte* Franz Götz

command of *Jagdgeschwader* – Göring as *Kommandeur* of JG Nr I and Loerzer of JG Nr III. But after the German capitulation of November 1918 Loerzer had to make his living as a civilian. He opted for commerce and became a successful cigar salesman.

Flying was in his blood, however. And when, in March 1933 – just two months after Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party had come to power in Germany – his erstwhile crewmate, and now the new régime's Minister of Aviation, Hermann Göring,

offered him the presidency of the *Deutsche Luftsportverband* (DLV), he jumped at the opportunity.

Divided into 16 regional groups, the DLV, as it was commonly abbreviated, was the umbrella organisation set up by the party to control all hitherto private and sports flying throughout the Reich. With the *Pour le mérite* at his throat, and with 41 wartime victories to his credit (he was the ninth-ranking German fighter pilot of World War 1), Bruno Loerzer was a charismatic figure whose leadership was to have a positive influence on DLV members both young and old alike.

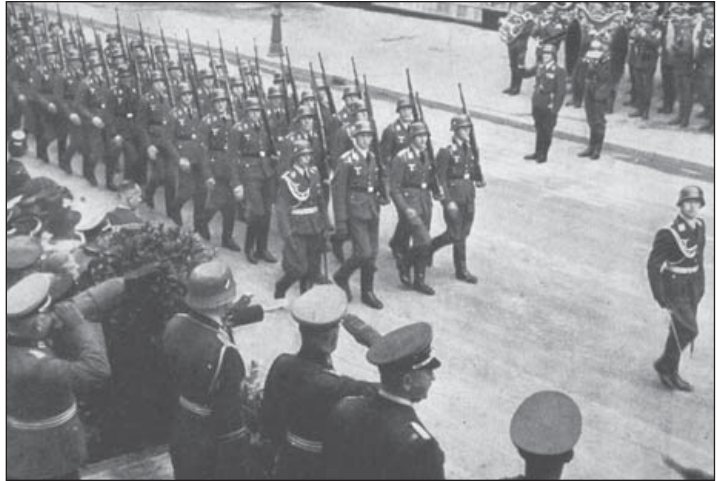
He took these qualities with him when he joined the Luftwaffe proper, where he was tasked first with setting up I./JG 232 (the later I./ZG 2) at Bernburg on 1 April 1936, before subsequently being appointed *Geschwaderkommodore* of JG 334 the following year.

Loerzer's command was but one part of the Luftwaffe's ambitious expansion programme of spring 1937. His two component *Gruppen* had been brought into being in the manner that was customary during that period of rapid growth. Known as the 'mother-daughter' system, this entailed hiving off a cadre of experienced pilots and ground personnel from an existing *Gruppe*, or *Gruppen*, to provide a ready-made nucleus for a brand new unit.

Hauptmann Hubert Merhart von Bernegg's I./JG 334 had thus been formed around a core of personnel drawn from both I. and II./JG 134, while the 'mother' unit of Major Hans-Detlev Herhudt von Rhoden's II./JG 334 had been that fountainhead of so much of the Luftwaffe's pre-war fighter strength – I./JG 132 'Richthofen' (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units 1 - Jagdgeschwader 2 'Richthofen'* for further details). Both I. and II./JG 334 were composed initially of just two *Staffeln*, but each was to be brought up to full establishment by the activation of a third *Staffel* on 1 July 1937.

Equipped with Arado Ar 68E biplanes, the whole *Geschwader* first took up residence at Mannheim-Sandhofen. For Loerzer's *Stab* and I. *Gruppe*, this was a purely temporary measure, however. The Luftwaffe's rate of expansion was far outstripping the number of airfields available to accommodate it. New bases were being built as quickly as possible, but *Stab* and I./JG 334's assigned airfield – formerly a trotting racecourse on the southeastern outskirts of Wiesbaden – was still far from finished.

I./JG 334's arrival at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim in July 1937 was marked by a ceremonial parade through the town. To the strains of martial music provided by the band in the background, Oberleutnant Werner Mölders leads his 1. *Staffel* past the reviewing stand



Leaving II./JG 334 in sole possession of Mannheim, *Stab* and I. *Gruppe* were thus first obliged to spend several weeks at Frankfurt-Rebstock, before finally being able to occupy their newly completed base at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim in July 1937.

Situated some 40 miles apart on the eastern bank of the Middle Rhine, Mannheim and Wiesbaden would house the *Geschwader* right up until the outbreak of war and beyond. Charged with the aerial defence of this important central sector of the Franco-German border, the *Geschwader* led a remarkably sedentary existence in comparison to many of the other Luftwaffe *Jagdgruppen* of the time that were shuttled around like so many chess pieces during the final years of peace and the opening months of the new war in Europe.

There were, of course, *some* breaks in this home-based routine. The first of these occurred in the autumn of 1937, when the Arados of JG 334 participated in the large-scale manoeuvres held in northern Germany. There would also be gunnery camps for the pilots, with firing practice over the North Sea, as well as exercises for the groundcrews that were specifically designed to prepare them for any eventual war of movement.

Training did not always go strictly according to plan. A pair of I. *Gruppe* Arados has come to grief in a ploughed field on a hillside somewhere in northern Germany during the autumn manoeuvres of 1937



Early in 1938, the *Geschwader's* Ar 68Es were replaced by the first models of Willy Messerschmitt's revolutionary new monoplane fighter, the Bf 109B. And in mid-March 1938 – just a few days after the *Anschluss*, or annexation of Austria into the Greater German Reich – JG 334 was ordered to fly its *Bertas*, via Bad Aibling, in Bavaria, to Wiener-Neustadt, where it was to stage a number of demonstration flights for the benefit of the local populace (see Osprey Aviation Elite Units 6 - *Jagdgeschwader 54 'Grünherz'* for further details). The *Geschwader's* Bf 109s were soon back guarding the Rhine, however.

In addition to its various manoeuvres, exercises and demonstrations, the Luftwaffe was also currently involved in a more covert undertaking. Pilots were quietly being posted away from their units for lengthy periods of time. One such individual was a certain Werner Mölders, who had been among the cadre supplied by II./JG 134 to help form I./JG 334, and who had been serving as *Kapitän* of the latter's 1. *Staffel* since its inception.

On 13 April 1938 Oberleutnant Werner Mölders took leave of I./JG 334, his destination, Spain. There, he succeeded Adolf Galland as *Kapitän* of 3./J/88, the third *Staffel* of the *Legion Condor's* fighter arm. Mölders was just one of a number of future Luftwaffe *Experten* who underwent their baptism of fire during the Spanish Civil War. But when he returned to Germany at the end of 1938 with 14 Republican aircraft to his credit, Mölders had proved himself the most successful of them all. He had also rewritten the rule book on fighter combat.

In fact, Mölders was to spend several weeks at the RLM (Air Ministry) in Berlin putting his experiences down on paper and drafting a new handbook on fighter tactics. His most important innovation was the scrapping of the outmoded 'vic' of three aircraft flying in arrowhead formation – a leader and two wingmen – and replacing them with a formation of four, consisting of two mutually supporting pairs. It is perhaps worth recording that not only did the RAF and the USAAF subsequently adopt this practice after the outbreak of war, it remains the standard basic fighter formation to this day.

By the time the now Hauptmann Werner Mölders returned to Wiesbaden-Erbenheim in mid-March 1939 to resume command of his 1. *Staffel* a lot had happened.

Oberst Bruno Loerzer had already left the *Geschwader* for the first of a succession of staff appointments a fortnight prior to Mölders' departure for Spain. His place at the head of JG 334 had been taken by Oberstleutnant Werner Junck on 1 April 1938. In the weeks that followed, the first Bf 109Ds began to arrive. And on 1 July 1938 moves were made to bring the *Geschwader* up to full establishment strength by the addition of a third *Gruppe*.



Transition from the Arados to Willy Messerschmitt's new Bf 109 monoplane fighter could be even more dangerous. According to a *Gruppe* member, this photograph depicts the scene of the memorial service held at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim for 3. *Staffel's* Obergefreiter Kredit, killed in a flying accident on 3 June 1938

Initially, III./JG 334 consisted of just one *Staffel*. It was not until 1 August that a *Gruppenstab* and the remaining two *Staffeln* actually came into being. Command of the *Gruppe* was given to Hauptmann Walter Schmidt-Coste, previously the *Kapitän* of 4./JG 334. The first *Staffel* had been equipped with Ar 68Es, but the whole *Gruppe* was to begin converting onto Bf 109Ds before August was out.

The Luftwaffe may have been supplying its units with the latest types of aircraft, but the thorny problem of housing them all remained unresolved. The airfield construction programme was still lagging a long way behind the output of machines and the creation of new units. It had originally been intended to base III./JG 334 at Mainz-Finthen, but this site was so far behind schedule that Schmidt-Coste's *Gruppe* had to share Mannheim-Sandhofen with II./JG 334.

Meanwhile, other elements of the *Geschwader* had again been attending summer gunnery camp on the island of Wangerooge, in the North Sea. References then differ as to the activities of JG 334 during the tense days of the Munich crisis in late September 1938. Most sources suggest that Oberstleutnant Junck's three *Gruppen* were retained at Wiesbaden and Mannheim on homeland defence duties. This would seem to make sense, as there was a very real fear in Germany at the time that France might react strongly in the face of Hitler's pressing demands for the Sudeten territories of Czechoslovakia to be ceded to the Reich. One reference work, however, maintains that a solitary *Gruppe* followed the route taken during the annexation of Austria in the spring by staging via Bad Aibling to Wiener-Neustadt, where it was held at readiness for the duration of the crisis.

Delayed by the intervening Austrian and Sudeten actions, the reorganisation of the Luftwaffe's command structure back in April – in which the six existing *Luftkreiskommandos* had been replaced by three main *Luftwaffengruppenkommandos* – finally resulted in the re-numbering of all fighter units on 1 November 1938. But for JG 334, the changes on this date went far beyond simple redesignation.

Firstly, the short-lived III. *Gruppe* was detached from the *Geschwader* altogether. Transferred to Gablingen, near Augsburg, it there joined the ranks of the so-called 'heavy' fighter arm as I./ZG 144 (later to become the famous II./ZG 76 'Sharksmouth' *Zerstörergruppe*).

More mystifying, perhaps, was the disbandment of Oberstleutnant Junck's *Geschwaderstab* on this same 1 November. In its place he inherited the so-called '*Stab Regensburg*'. Quite where this staff had come from (apart from Regensburg, of course!), and what its previous duties had been, is unclear. But it was this unit that now assumed the mantle of *Stab* JG 133 in line with the new High Command directive, while Junck's two remaining component *Gruppen* were likewise redesignated to become I. and II./JG 133.

During the winter of 1938/39, the *Geschwader* began to take delivery of its first Bf 109Es. And on 1 February 1939 another round of command restructuring – this time into *Luftflotten* – led to the emergence two months later of Junck's *Geschwader*, still only two-*Gruppen* strong, as JG 53. It was the third *Jagdgeschwader* (after JGs 51 and 52) commanded by *Luftflotte* 3 in the southwestern quadrant of Adolf Hitler's Greater German Reich.

SITZKRIEG AND BLITZKRIEG

When Germany invaded Poland in the early hours of 1 September 1939, Oberstleutnant Werner Junck's two *Gruppen* were still firmly ensconced at Wiesbaden and Mannheim, just as they had been (purportedly) a year earlier during the Sudeten crisis. Hitler was again concerned about the French reaction to his latest seizure of territory, and this time he had every reason to be. Poland was not going to fall into his lap as the result of yet another bloodless coup, as it was being invaded by overwhelming force of arms. It was a step too far by the *Führer*, and one that the western allies could not ignore. On 3 September Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Suddenly, the pilots of JG 53 found themselves in the frontline. And not just in the frontline, but in the most strategically important sector of the only common land border between Germany and France. The *Geschwader's* area of operations stretched from Saarbrücken up to Trier. This took in the *Dreiländereck* – or three-nations corner – the point at which the frontiers of Luxembourg, France and Germany all met. Beyond this, Germany's western border abutted those of neutral Luxembourg, Belgium and Holland all the way up to the North Sea.

Although still based at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim upon the outbreak of war, elements of I./JG 53 were dispersed to a meadow outside the base as a precautionary measure against possible enemy air attack





The *Geschwader* had long been preparing for the eventuality of hostilities in the west. This photograph, taken in early 1939 (note the anonymous II. *Gruppe Dora* in the background) could be any group of Luftwaffe fighter pilots. But the maps they are studying clearly show the distinctive outline of the *Dreiländereck*, the area over which JG 53 would operate throughout the 'Phoney war'

During the early months of the war, the neutrality of these countries was strictly observed, and aircraft of the warring powers were forbidden to overfly their airspace. So, although no heavy bombing raids followed hard on the heels of France's declaration of war, JG 53's two *Gruppen* soon found themselves in the thick of things as the *Dreiländereck* 'junction' quickly became the main point of entry for French, and French-based RAF, reconnaissance aircraft sent into Germany. The Allied machines would first have to negotiate this southern tip of Luxembourg before heading northwards, *behind* the Belgian and Dutch borders, to photograph such areas as the industrial heartland of the Ruhr and its surrounding defences.

But the *Geschwader's* first two victories of the war were to be claimed close to Saarbrücken along the southern, quieter end of its patrol sector. It was shortly before midday on 9 September that a pair of Bf 109Es of 1./JG 53 spotted a lone Bloch MB 131 reconnaissance-bomber of the *Armée de l'Air* high to the northeast of Saarbrücken. The enemy machine immediately turned away to starboard, diving hard for the safety of the border. The two Messerschmitts rapidly overhauled it, and the leading fighter, flown by Oberfeldwebel Walter Grimmling, opened fire at short range and set the Bloch's starboard engine on fire. Trailing a thin streamer of smoke, the bomber crossed the border, still in a steep dive.

Ordered not to enter French airspace, the two *Emils* were forced to break off the chase and Grimmling lost sight of his victim, which he had identified – incorrectly – as a British Blenheim. Confirmation that it had crashed was subsequently received from German ground troops in the area.

Some three hours later, 3./JG 53's Leutnant Wilhelm Hoffmann also claimed a kill – this time an obsolescent Bloch MB 200 bomber – in the same region.

The unit's first Iron Crosses. 1./JG 53's Oberfeldwebel Walter Grimmling (left) claimed the *Geschwader's* first victory of the war – a 'Blenheim' downed near Saarbrücken on 9 September 1939. Unteroffizier Heinrich Bezner (right) was credited with one of the three Mureaux 115s shot down in the same area the following day



Oberfeldwebel Grimmling's *Staffelkapitän*, Hauptmann Werner Mölders, had not been aloft on that 9 September. Twenty-four hours earlier he had suffered engine damage during an otherwise inconclusive encounter with half-a-dozen French Hawk H-75A fighters. He attempted to nurse his *Emil* back to base at Wiesbaden, but was less than halfway there when the engine threatened to quit altogether and he had to make a forced landing in an open meadow near Birkenfeld. The machine somersaulted and Mölders sustained a painful – albeit not serious – back injury. His condition was, however, bad enough to keep him out of action for the next 11 days, during which time I./JG 53 increased its overall total of kills to six – including a second for Walter Grimmling – and suffered its first fatality (3. *Staffel*'s Unteroffizier Dill was lost in unknown circumstances on 19 September).

It was on 20 September that Werner Mölders scored his first victory of World War 2 – one of a trio of French H-75As bounced by 1. *Staffel* between Contz and Sierck, at the very apex of the *Dreiländereck*. Mölders' own combat report gives the bare facts;

'I took off with my *Schwarm* (section of four aircraft) at 1427 hrs to intercept six enemy monoplanes reported south of Trier. As the *Schwarm* overflew the River Saar near Merzig at 4500 metres, six machines were sighted south of Conz (*sic*) at 5000 metres. I climbed above the enemy in a wide curve to the north and carried out a surprise attack on the rearmost machine. I opened fire from approximately 50 metres, whereupon the Curtiss began to fishtail. After a further lengthy burst, smoke came out of the machine and individual pieces flew off it. It then tipped forward into a dive and I lost sight of it, as I had to defend myself against other opponents newly arriving on the scene.'

Mölders' success was confirmed by his three *Schwarm* members, who further reported that the French pilot bailed out before the Hawk crashed in flames to the west of Merzig.

The twentieth of September was also the day the Mannheim-based II./JG 53 opened its scoresheet. The first entry went to Oberleutnant Heinz Bretnütz, the *Kapitän* of 6. *Staffel*, who downed a French observation balloon at 0955 hrs (2./JG 53's *Stabsfeldwebel* Ignaz Prestele had destroyed a balloon two hours earlier, this being the first of three lost by the French in the area south of Saarbrücken on this date). But the true identity of the *Gruppe*'s second and third kills of 20 September – a pair of 'Blenheims' claimed by pilots of 5./JG 53 within a minute of each other over Bitche, on the French side of the border – remains a mystery.

As the first month of the war neared its end, I. and II./JG 53 continued to bring down the occasional enemy aircraft and balloon – four confirmed for I. *Gruppe* (including another balloon for 'Igel' Prestele), and six for II. *Gruppe*. Against this, II./JG 53 had to record its first casualty when 6. *Staffel*'s Feldwebel Hellge was reportedly lost in action against French Morane-Saulnier fighters over Bergzabern on 22 September.

Then, on 30 September, a sudden flurry of activity not only resulted in the heaviest air action over the western front to date, but also brought JG 53 its first confirmed RAF kills of the war.

The day began, however, with the destruction of a solitary French Potez 63 reconnaissance aircraft by Hauptmann Günther *Freiherr* von Maltzahn, *Kommandeur* of II. *Gruppe*, over the Saarbrücken area in the



Pictured in front of the DFS (German Gliding Research Institute) hangar at Darmstadt-Griesheim are the five pilots of 2./JG 53 who destroyed an entire formation of RAF Fairey Battles west of Saarbrücken on 30 September 1939. They are, from left to right, Unteroffizier Josef 'Sepp' Wurmheller, Unteroffizier Franz Kaiser, Oberleutnant Rolf Pingel (*Staffelkapitän*), Stabsfeldwebel Ignaz 'Igel' Prestele and Unteroffizier Hans Kornatz

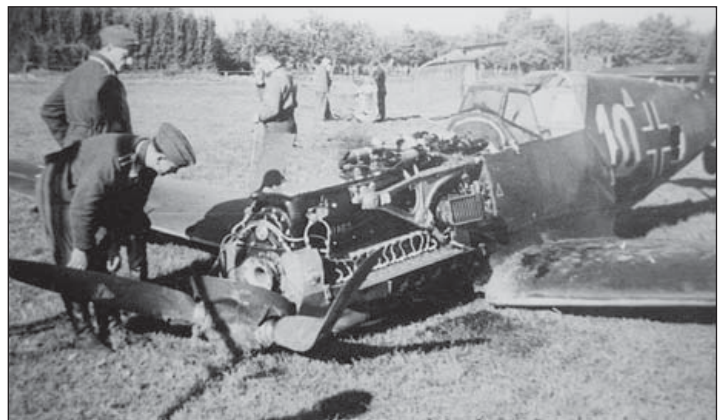
late morning. This was the first victory credited to future Oak Leaves *Experte* and *Geschwaderkommodore* 'Henri' Maltzahn.

Shortly after the demise of the Potez, which crash-landed in flames in France, a formation of five Fairey Battles of the RAF's No 150 Sqn approached the same Saarbrücken-Merzig sector on a high-altitude photographic reconnaissance mission. The British machines were intercepted by eight *Emils* of 2./JG 53 and all of them were destroyed.

The first fell to the guns of *Staffelkapitän* Oberleutnant Rolf Pingel close to the target area. The last was chased some 32 kilometres back into French territory by Unteroffizier Josef Wurmheller, who riddled it with cannon and machine gun fire before breaking off the pursuit. 'Sepp' Wurmheller confidently claimed the Battle destroyed, as indeed it was. Although the pilot managed to get the crippled machine back to No 150 Sqn's base near Chalons, it burst into flames the moment it came to rest and was a complete write-off.

In the course of two further engagements later that same afternoon, pilots of 3. and 5. *Staffeln* were credited with another seven French aircraft, making the *Geschwader's* total for the day 13!

These air actions of late September 1939 were carried out against a backdrop of equally hectic activity on the ground at Wiesbaden and



Other elements of the *Geschwader* did not fare so well against French Hawk H-75A fighters on that same 30 September. Four pilots were killed and a fifth belly-landed his damaged 'White 10' (of 1. *Staffel*) near Wiesbaden



Officers of the newly activated III./JG 53 at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim in the autumn of 1939. They are, from left right, Leutnant Friedrich-Karl Müller, an unidentified oberleutnant of ground personnel (dark collar tabs), Hauptmann Werner Mölders (*Gruppenkommandeur*) and Oberleutnant Hans von Hahn (*StaKa 8./JG 53*)

Mannheim. The reason for this was that the *Geschwader* was again in the process of being raised to full three-*Gruppe* status, but this time there was no obliging 'mother' unit to provide the necessary nucleus. The *Geschwader* was left very much to its own devices, and elements of both I. and II. *Gruppen* were utilised to form the new III./JG 53.

The unit was officially activated during the last week of September at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim, I./JG 53 having been transferred forward to Kirchberg, in the Hunsrück – the high ridge of ground between the Rhine and Moselle valleys – to make room for the new *Gruppe*. Command of III./JG 53 was entrusted to Hauptmann Werner Mölders, who wasted little time in declaring the unit operational on 10 October 1939.

It was also during this period that the famous 'Ace of Spades' badge came into being, introduced at the suggestion of Generalmajor *Dipl.Ing.* Hans Klein, who had succeeded Oberstleutnant Werner Junck as *Kommodore* of JG 53 on 1 October. According to his own account, Klein first asked members of the *Geschwader* whether there should be a series of individual *Gruppe* and *Staffel* badges, or one emblem for the whole unit. The latter was decided upon, as it was felt that this would promote a stronger sense of '*Geschwader* loyalty and comradeship'. And so the iconic 'Ace of Spades' motif was chosen, and stencilled on both sides of the engine cowlings of all the Messerschmitts assigned to JG 53. It would still be in evidence when Germany surrendered in the spring of 1945.

By mid-October 1939, the opposing ground armies had reached that point of stalemate that would earn the first eight months of hostilities on the western front the nickname of the 'Phoney war' or *Sitzkrieg*. In the air

In October 1939 *Geschwader-kommodore* Generalmajor Hans Klein – pictured here (right) with Werner Mölders – was responsible for introducing the famed 'Ace of Spades' badge . . .

