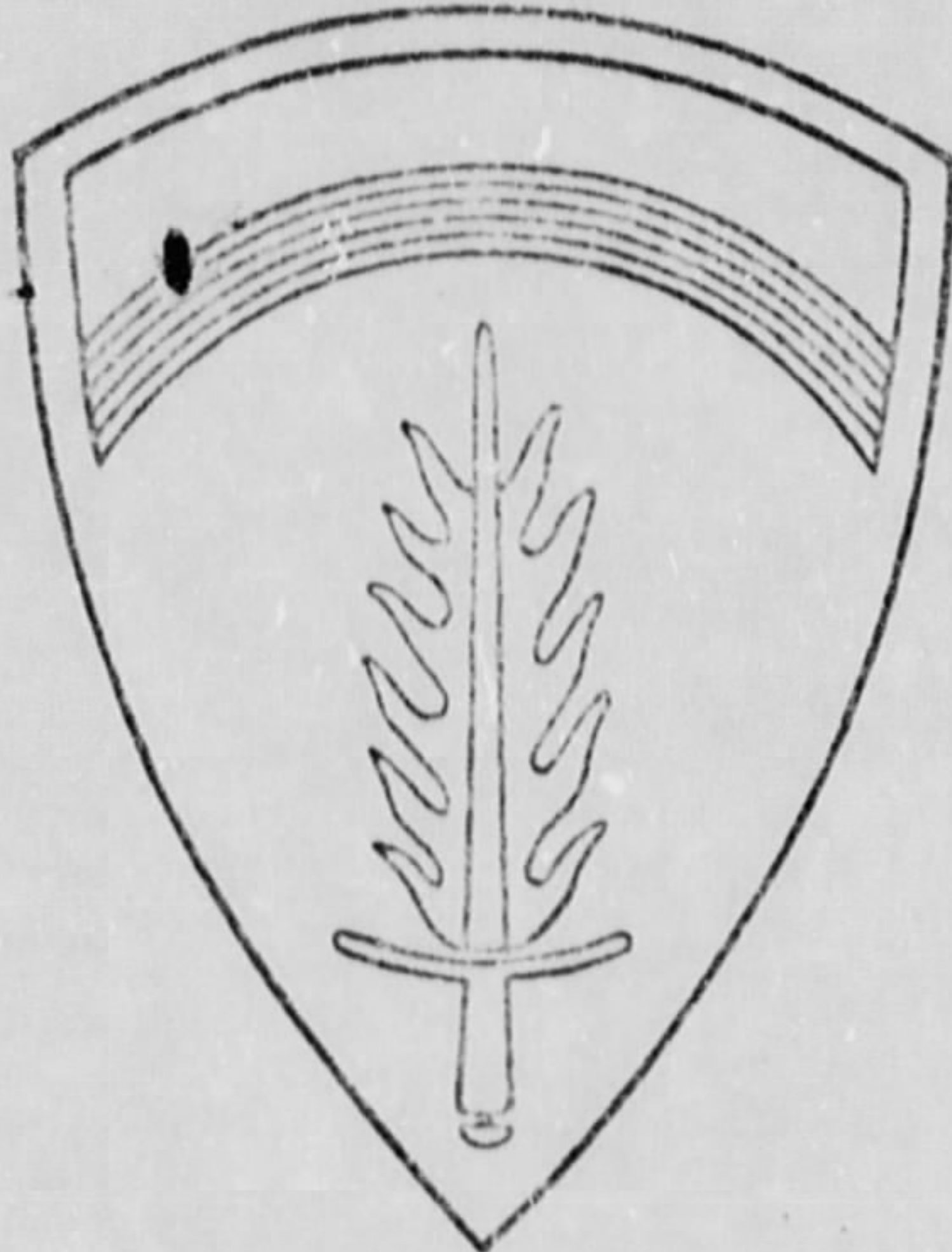


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1st STUKA WING (FEBRUARY-MAY 1941)

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MS # D-064

1st Stuka Wing

( Feb - May 1941 )

by

Hans-Joachim Rath, Generalmajor a.D.

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## THE 1ST STUKA WING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATER

FEBRUARY - MAY 1941 (MALTA AND CRETE)

I. ATTACKS ON MALTA, FEBRUARY - MAY 1941.

In order to intensify the attacks on Malta, the 1st Stuka Wing was transferred to Sicily in the beginning of February 1941, and put under the control of X Air Corps. The wing comprised two groups (Ju 87's), a headquarters squadron (ME 110's), and an air signal company. It had a full complement of eighty aircraft, and brought along its own technical personnel (two airframe service companies) --- a measure which resulted in keeping a high percentage of aircraft operational during the course of combat missions.

The wing had the task of neutralizing Malta and disrupting the enemy convoys that sailed out of Gibraltar. However, upon reaching the waters south of Sardinia these convoys headed for Malta only during periods of bad weather. As a result, the wing concentrated its main effort on the military installations of Malta itself, that is to say, the harbor installations, concentrations of vessels, airfields, ammunition and fuel depots, and similar objectives.

The entire wing was stationed at Trapani. However, because of the limited range of the Ju 87's as well as for reasons of dispersion, the airframe of Comiso had been chosen as base of operations. Readyng the wing for a mission at that airfield took 1½ hours. The planes were fueled, and armed with a bomb load up to 700 kg -- depending on whether a mission

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was directed against sea or land targets.

Attacks were ordered on the basis of reconnaissance data procured by the Commander in Chief South and X Air Corps. Special reconnaissance by the headquarters squadron of the wing preceded the attacks proper and determined those details that were important for the execution of orders, e.g., types of vessels; speed, nature, and composition of convoys; formations and escort vessels. Shortly before the Stukas set out on their mission, that intelligence was checked once more by fighter aircraft.

The wing flew its missions independently. Combined operations with heavy bomber units were not possible, because the shortage of fighter aircraft allowed an escort of only one fighter squadron per mission. The Italian escort service was a failure. Italian escort aircraft in most instances flew only up to the outskirts of the Flak curtain, then turned and were satisfied with taking up a covering position out at sea. Moreover, the Italians refused to fly several escort missions (for up to three attacks) on any one day. All the more tribute must be paid to the German fighters and their valor in the face of the most serious hardships. Undaunted by enemy fighters, Flak, and the dangers of skimming the waves of the Mediterranean in low-level flights, our fighters supported the Stuka wing in an exemplary manner. The intensity of the antiaircraft defense of Malta deserves particular mention. In quantity as well as in quality it was the most severe that the wing had ever encountered up to that time.

The Stuka attacks on Malta had considerable effect. Not only were the harbor installations badly damaged and numerous ships sunk, but also air-

fields, runways, parked planes, workshops, and fuel dumps were thoroughly destroyed. Stuka attacks, however, were unable to reach particularly vital underground installations that had been built into the rock.

True to the existing concept about the commitment of Stuka formations, higher headquarters had always rejected the idea of night missions by these aircraft. Nevertheless, the 1st Stuka Wing was the first to undertake the experiment, and successfully continued to fly night missions.

For night operations the facilities of Comiso airdrome were the poorest possible. Only the transverse-bar approach markers and the runway proper were sparingly illuminated, while one lone beacon light stood in the vicinity of the field. No radio beacon was available. Consequently, missions could only be flown during nights on which the lights were visible. A direction indicator searchlight was used whenever weather conditions took a turn for the worse.

Attack missions were flown by individual aircraft which took off at five-minute intervals. Each aircraft flew an average of two missions per night. Depending on weather conditions, the Stukas approached their targets at altitudes up to 3 000 m and released their bombs at altitudes up to 1 000 m. During nighttime dives on area targets presented no difficulties whatever. Pin-point targets, however, could be made out only on rare occasions.

The night missions soon enjoyed great popularity among the flying personnel, because of the much more limited Flak fire and the absence of enemy fighters. Skillful acrobatics enabled the Stukas to dodge the

searchlights. The alternate use of the starboard and port sirens successfully deceived the enemy ground defenses.

Our unceasing day and night raids visibly weakened the Flak defenses of Malta by forcing them to expend large amounts of ammunition in the face of the serious supply situation. Coupled with the number of enemy aircraft shot down by our fighter escorts, the Stuka attacks on the airfields led to the result that at times only a few lone British Hurricanes were to be spotted in the air and on the ground.

That situation, however, changed rapidly whenever a spell of bad weather enabled a convoy to break through to Malta.

The German air-sea rescue service, which stood by throughout every one of the missions of the wing, performed successful work. The wing lost a total of only seven Ju 87's and two Me 110's over Malta as the result of enemy action. Numerous aircraft reached their home base despite serious Flak damage.

During some periods climatic factors had a detrimental effect on the health of flying personnel.

## II. CRETE COMMITMENT, MAY 1941.

In mid-May 1941, the wing received orders to transfer to Germany in order to have airplanes and engines repaired and replaced in previously prepared workshops and to replenish its personnel. Ground components had already been loaded on trains and were leaving, and the planes were ready to take off for Germany when the wing received orders to proceed to Athens in its present condition.

At noon of 22 May the airplanes proceeded as ordered from Trapani to Athens. At Athens they found their orders for the following day: a raid during the early hours of 23 May on British naval forces which German reconnaissance had reported north of Crete and in Suda Bay.

At dawn of 23 May the wing transferred to the operations base at Argos, where provisional ground personnel fuelled and armed the Stukas. In two three-hour missions the wing bombed strong ship concentrations in Suda Bay — among them the previously damaged cruiser York, which was completely destroyed during that raid. No further enemy vessels were spotted at sea. German armed air reconnaissance did not reveal any further targets west and south of Crete. Between six and eight enemy vessels had been sunk in Suda Bay, among them the cruiser York.

The missions of the wing during the following days generally aimed at supporting the hard-pressed army forces and more or less served to substitute for the lacking medium artillery. Operations were carried out according to the established principles of co-operation between Stukas and ground forces, although the customary radio and radiotelephone communications with armored and other ground units were not yet available. The missions were ordered by VIII Air Corps on the basis of ground reconnaissance data or upon requests from the ground forces. As a rule, three or four targets were assigned in proper order of priority.

Particularly noteworthy was the fact that during these sorties the Stukas dropped their bombs separately, one after the other, and followed up with strafing runs for purposes of intensifying the effect on enemy

morale. Our aircraft remained over the enemy as long as their fuel supply would possibly allow. All aircraft had to return to Argos, because no ground organization existed on Crete at that time.

By early June the activities of the wing in that theater of operations drew to a close. It transferred to Germany for replacements and reorganization and two weeks later was committed on the Eastern Front.

Signed: Hans Joachim Rath