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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

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THE ROLE
OF THE GERMAN AIR FORCE
IN
THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC.

A Study

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The role of the German Air Force
in the Battle of the Atlantic.

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I. Historical sketch

By personal order of the Fuehrer, the post of Fliegerfuhrer Atlantik was created in March 1941, with the task of directing the attacks on enemy shipping in the Atlantic, in close cooperation with the C-in-C. Submarine Fleet.

The area of operations comprised the convoy routes from the Mediterranean to England, the Eastern part of the route from England to America, and the convoy routes off the East, South and West coasts of England. Our attacks on enemy shipping met with no opposition either by Flak or from aircraft, and early successes, especially in the Atlantic, were surprisingly great.

But six months later the situation had changed completely. The use of the Condor as a dive bomber, the only form of attack suited to its armament, had to be discontinued first against convoys, and later against single ships, owing to the introduction of strong defensive armament by the enemy.

The continued use of the Condor on reconnaissance missions for the submarine fleet would have been to our advantage, had systematic submarine attacks on convoys been maintained. As the convoys however, became more and more strongly escorted by destroyers and aircraft, our submarines suffered increasingly high losses, and their area of operations was therefore transferred to a point on the convoy route to America outside the range of the Condors. The plan was that by late autumn 1941, operations should be conducted exclusively in North American waters which provided both favourable fighting conditions and numerous targets.

By December 1941, practically all combined operations with the submarine fleet had to be discontinued for several months, no more submarines being available for operations in European waters. The Condor units were transferred to other theatres of war, some to reconnaissance units to Norway, and some as transport aircraft to the Mediterranean and Eastern fronts. Fliegerfuhrer Atlantik was then left with only one bomber Geschwader of Ju 88's, (KG 6) consisting of a weak bomber Gruppe, for the continuation of the Atlantic struggle. Owing to their limited range, these forces could only be used against convoys off the English coast.

The great possibilities of success, especially in combined torpedo and bomber attacks, were never realised for two reasons. Firstly, because the torpedo carrying aircraft were transferred to Norway after their first successful operation, and secondly, because available bombers were regularly despatched against land targets in England and were consequently greatly weakened.

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In May 1942, the C-in-C. Submarine Fleet again asked for help from Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik. His intention was not, however, to send the aircraft out on reconnaissance missions and raids against the enemy convoys, as the Fuehrer had ordered, but primarily to protect the submarines in the Bay of Biscay from the threatened attacks.

This task was the aim of the operations conducted during the whole of 1942 and part of 1943. The T.E. fighter units established by Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik succeeded in driving British anti-submarine patrols out of the Bay of Biscay into the Atlantic.

As regards reconnaissance over the Atlantic, the combined efforts of Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik and C-in-C. Submarine Fleet were directed at protecting the blockade runners. In addition, during a period of 7 weeks, with daily average of 6 aircraft patrolling the sea area between 38 and 49 degrees North and 10 to 20 degrees West, approximately 4 million tons of merchant shipping and 0.3 million tons of war ships were sighted. Individual convoys remained within range of our long-range bombers for at least 4 to 5 days, so that during the above mentioned 7 weeks, nearly one seventh of the enemy's merchant shipping lay within range of our long range bombers.

Our armed reconnaissance, however, seldom led to attacks on shipping, as such large forces were engaged on reconnaissance that aircraft were frequently not available for bombing attacks. In addition, weather conditions and low lying cloud often prevented any attacks from high altitudes.

The Summer of 1942 saw the conversion of the FW 200 to Lotfe 7 D. The successes achieved by III/K.G. 40 after conversion from the Spring of 1943 onwards, proved that given suitable aircraft and well trained crews, the Luftwaffe could in no theatre of War achieve such great successes with such small losses as over the Atlantic.

II. Operational Directives for Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik

In September 1943, the Reichsmarschal issued a directive to Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik containing instructions for the participation of the Luftwaffe in the attacks on enemy shipping in the Atlantic. Detailed orders were given on the following subjects:

- (a) Long range reconnaissance of shipping,
- (b) Defensive sorties in the Bay of Biscay,
- (c) Attacks on convoys and single ships in the Atlantic, based on interpretation of aerial photographs and reconnaissance reports,
- (d) Reconnaissance of enemy submarines.

It was stated that submarines and aircraft were pursuing the same aim, and Fliegerfuehrer Atlantik should therefore cooperate closely with C-in-C. Submarine Fleet. Although only limited forces were available at present, considerable successes could still be achieved.

III. Situation Report

The British are entirely dependent on the maintenance of regular sea traffic for the import of raw materials to Great Britain and the export of manufactured goods; supply routes to all theatres of war must also be kept open. Great Britain must at all costs keep the Atlantic free from any possible interference by the enemy.

The partial success of German air and naval operations over the Atlantic during 1941 and at the beginning of 1942 has led the enemy to effect a substantial concentration of defensive strength, for convoys are still

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Britain's principal means of conducting overseas trade, and our submarines present a very considerable menace.

The most effective weapon against submarines at sea is the aeroplane, and British sea routes are therefore planned so as to lie within the range of British aircraft. The more the British therefore succeed in establishing unchallenged air superiority over the convoy routes, thereby hampering German submarine activity, the less danger will there be for the entire supply system.

The operational capacity of our submarines is declining in proportion to the increase in enemy air activity. The enemy now has greater forces and improved equipment at his disposal, and his aircraft have now also a substantially greater range than before.

Operations against Southbound convoys have had to be almost entirely discontinued owing to the overwhelming British air supremacy, and are now only possible with considerable losses of naval craft. Convoys travelling from West to East can still be attacked by submarines in an ever decreasing sea area between America and Europe in which the enemy air force is not quite so powerful.

The fact that the enemy has since the beginning of 1942 diverted a considerable proportion of his best equipped forces from attacks on Europe to the Battle of the Atlantic is an indication of the great importance which he attaches to operations in this area.

To combat the dangers of this situation, we must intensify our fight against the enemy air force over the Atlantic, and at the same time endeavour to provide our submarines with effective support.

The attacking enemy aircraft should as far as possible be intercepted at the nearest point to their own bases at which they are outside the range of action of enemy fighters. They should be attacked on their outward route by our long range fighters.

The following forces are available at present:-

- 1 Bomber Geschwader of 3 Gruppen equipped with He 177, Fw 200 and Ju 88 C 6
- 1 Long range reconnaissance Gruppe equipped with Ju 290's
- 1 Long range reconnaissance Staffel equipped with Ju 88 T's
- 1 Short range reconnaissance Staffel equipped with Ar 196's and
- 1 Fighter Staffel equipped with Fw 190 A5/U8's.

These forces are hopelessly insufficient for the above mentioned tasks. The aircraft used over the Atlantic must have a wide range of action over the sea, and must be equipped with every type of weapon used in naval warfare.

IV. Operational Planning

In order to continue the attacks of German submarines and aircraft against enemy shipping in the Atlantic and to provide effective support for our submarines, the following requirements must be met:

(a) A long range bomber Geschwader, consisting of at least 3 Gruppen of 36 aircraft each, must be formed and based on airfields along the Atlantic Coast. At least four airfields are necessary, two in the Southern and two in the Northern sector of the area.

(b) A new multi-purpose aircraft type with a minimum range of 2,500 km. will have to be employed. This new aircraft must be capable

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of carrying an additional payload of 1,000 kgs and must be equipped with the latest technical aids to bombing and reconnaissance. An average output of 80 aircraft per month would be sufficient to enable the Geschwader to receive replacements and also to build up reserves for the subsequent formation of other units. He 177's and Ju 290's will be used temporarily, but all units will later be equipped with Ju. 390's.

(c) IV KG.40 must undergo a course of training for bombing over the Atlantic and all personnel with some experience of flying over the sea will receive intensive training in tactics, navigation and armament; 40 long range bomber crews should complete their training each month.

(d) The development of the He 177 as a heavy long range fighter must be continued with a view to forming a unit to operate in conjunction with the Ju 390 against the enemy 4 engined formations.

The long range bomber forces will attack enemy convoys from the moment they leave their bases or come within our range of action until they either reach their destination or have passed out of our range. Our aim must be to disrupt the enemy defences by constantly altering our weapons and tactics.

The long range night fighter units equipped with Me 410's will operate outside the range of the enemy fighters and intercept the enemy bomber formations during their outward and return flights. They will attack the enemy 4 engined bomber formations, T.E. fighters operating against the German long range bombers, and T.E. bombers operating against our U-boats in the Bay of Biscay.

The immediate result of such a campaign will be a lessening of the enemy's air protection of his convoys due to heavy losses, and eventually its total cessation. The threat to our U-boats will be reduced, and a defensive area formed North of the Bay of Biscay which will help us to regain our air supremacy, and will serve as a protection to our forces in the area.

The He 177, which will later be used as a long range T.E. fighter, will be employed exclusively in defence of our submarines by means of operations against enemy bombers. This form of attack will reduce the air superiority of the enemy over the Atlantic within the range of our own air force to such an extent that our own forces will become more effective, and will also ease the position of our submarines.

Faced with this situation, the enemy may adopt any of the following counter measures:

(a) He may considerably reduce our strength by mass attacks on our bases. The enemy's air supremacy and our own insufficiently defended ground organization would make this easily practicable.

(b) He may increase the number of aircraft carriers sailing with each convoy, and thereby strengthen its defensive power.

(c) Alternatively, the enemy may occupy Spain and Portugal and establish air bases there as he has done in the Azores, with a view to providing strong air cover for convoys sailing North to South or South to North along the coast of the Iberian peninsula. In this event, our submarines and air force would be faced with a very difficult situation, and could only operate with strong day and night fighter support.

(d) Finally, and most improbable of all, the enemy may decide to use convoy routes outside the range of our aircraft. This step would however, lengthen the routes considerably, and would necessarily lead to a reduction in the size of convoys. It would also increase the chances of success of

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our submarines, as the range of action of the enemy's aircraft might prevent him from escorting these convoys.

The intensification of the sea war will however necessitate a complete change of strategy and the concentration of all available forces in the Western and Northern theatres of war. To this end Major von Schroetter has evolved the following plan of organization:

1. The subordination of all forces operating against Great Britain, including those stationed in Norway, to the command of a single Luftflotte. Included in this Command will be Fliegerkorps Atlantik, for operations over the open sea, including the North Atlantic, with a subordinate Command in Norway. Fliegerkorps Atlantik will comprise the following units:

- 2-3 long range bomber Geschwader
- 1 long range T.E. fighter Geschwader
- 1-2 T.E. fighter Geschwader
- 2-3 long range fighter Gruppen
- 1-2 long range reconnaissance Staffeln
- 2 mine detecting Staffeln
- 2 airborne W/T interception Staffeln
- 1 long range A.S.R. Unit.

2. The reconstruction of our ground organization and the reallocation of operational zones between the new Luftflotte and Luftflotte 2. Under this heading will be included the extension of the ground organization on the Atlantic coast to at least 9 heavy bomber and 5-6 T.E. fighter airfields in the immediate vicinity of the coast.

If, by adopting a long term policy we can succeed in waging the war against Great Britain on these lines, we shall be in a position to intensify our total war effort without increasing either personnel, training or production. We can best achieve this by concentrating on the war at sea, and on increasing our fighter force, at the same time renouncing all costly bomber raids on land targets in Britain.

This strategy will strengthen the defence of the Reich by offensive and defensive fighter operations, and at the same time hit the enemy at his weakest point, namely, his overseas shipping traffic. Furthermore, the air force will then be in a position to improve the operational possibilities of our naval forces and submarine fleet, and thus enable the latter to regain much of its former efficacy.

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