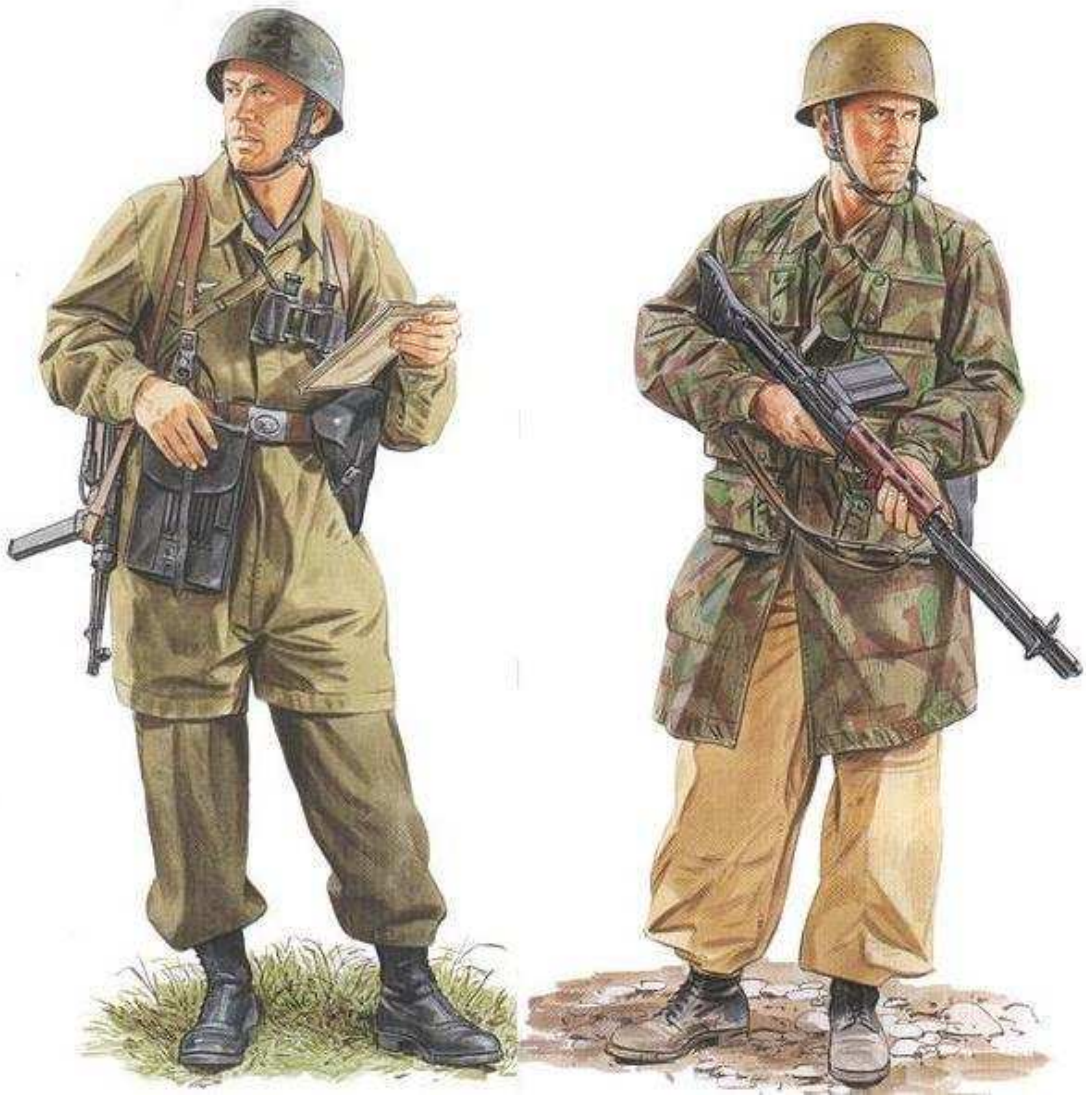
Portal Militar

Publicado por Panzertruppen Publications

Germany - Fallschirmjäger



German Fallschirmjäger

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Crete 1941
Fort Eben Emael
Cassino 1944

Publication date: Abril 2011
Panzertruppen Publications - www.panzertruppen.org

INDICE

Fallschirmjäger 7
World War I 8
First faltering steps....8
Early parachute experiments....9

German aviation after World War I 10

Hitler boosts the aviation arm 11
The Luftwaffe flexes its wings....11

Parachuting and airlanding....13
Blitzkrieg and the use of airborne forces 13
Organisation and Training 14
The Fallschirmjäger are born 15
Roles on the ground 16
The debate continues....17
Airlift capacity 18
Fallschirmjäger training 19
Campaign in the West 1939 - 40....19
The first Fallschirmjäger drops 20
Student's plan 22
Success at Eben Emael....23
The Invasion of Crete 24
Objective - Crete 25
Risk assessment 26

The final plan 26
The state of the garrison....28
Mopping up....30
The Eastern Front....31
Battles of attrition 32
Expansion of the airborne arm 33
Battle for Italy I 34

The plan for the invasion of Sicily....35
The invasion of Sicily 36
The Fallschirmjäger in Sicily....36
The loss of Primasole Bridge 37
German plans for the defence of Italy....38
The formation of I Parachute Corps....39
Actions at Anzio 40
Monte Cassino 41
First assault on Monte Cassino 42
Citadel of stone 44

The Third Battle of Cassino 44
Battle for Italy II 46
The weather deteriorates 48
The Allies run out of steam 49
The final push 49
A hopeless task 50
North Africa 51
Deployment to North Africa 51
Another airborne failure 54
The West 1944 - 45 55
The German order of battle 56
The initial German response 57

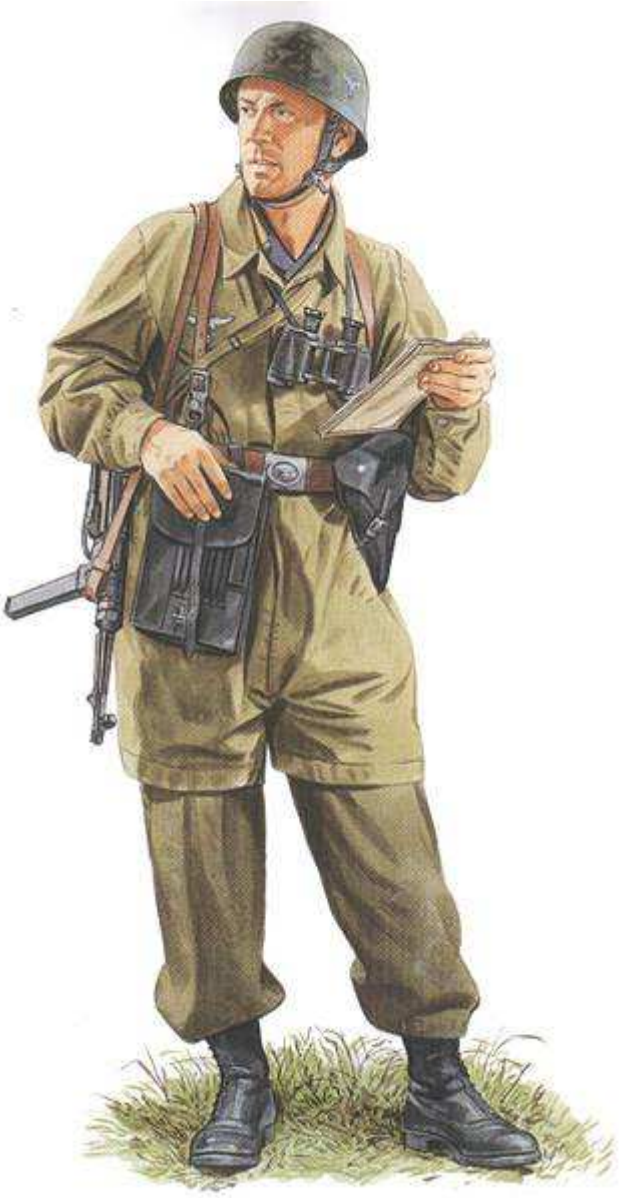
The fall of Hill 192 60
The Normandy Front collapse 60
Preparations for the last offensive in the West 61
Collapse in the West 63
Mussolinni Rescue 63
Operation is launched 64

Waffen-SS airborne units 65
Tito - elusive foe 66
The attack goes in 67
The collapse of "Knight's Move" 68
Kurt Student (12 May 1890 – 1 July 1978) 69

Fallschirmjäger

Though Germany only started to become interested in the raising of airborne forces in the mid-1930s, under the auspices of the Nazis the foundations were established upon which an entire airborne division could be created. But first an air force and air industry had to be created from scratch following defeat in World War

The development of the German Fallschirmjäger (parachutists) formations can be traced back to the years preceding World War I. During the years between 1900 and 1914, two major revolutionary military developments emerged. The first was the submersible; the second, and more junior, was powered flight. All Europe was fascinated by the latter, being beguiled by the fantasies and hysteria that surrounded it. In Germany in particular there was much interest shown in powered flight, although in Great Britain the relevant authorities were sceptical. In 1909, for example, the British Committee of Imperial Defence reported that "it had yet to be shown whether aeroplanes are sufficiently reliable to be used under unfavourable weather conditions. The committee has been unable to obtain any trustworthy evidence to show whether any great improvement was to be expected in the immediate future". The high cost of an aeroplane, £1000, was noted and the committee concluded that £45,000 should be invested in airship research instead. The War Office soon announced that aeroplane experiments had ceased "as the cost has proved too great: £2500". Meanwhile, by 1909 the French had expended the equivalent of £47,000 on aeroplanes for the army. The Germans, wishing to dominate the fledgling science, spent the equivalent of £400,000 on aeroplane research alone.



In Germany an aviation test project was set up, overseen by Captain de le Roi of the German War Ministry, and a technical section was established under a staff officer, Major Hesse. To link the efforts of the army with those of pri-

vate industry, an inspectorate was established under the command of Lieutenant-General Freiherr von Lyncker. The result of this unification between government and industry was the establishment of an aircraft design agency. In 1909, aircraft were used by the military for the first time during manoeuvres watched by Kaiser Wilhelm II. The following year saw the establishment of the first flying schools, and on 8 July 1910 Captain de le Roi assumed command of the provisional flying school at Döberitz. The Flying Command Döberitz consisted of Captain de le Roi, together with Lieutenant Geerdtz, and Second Lieutenants Mackenthun and von Tarnoczy. A week later the four began their flying instruction, and by the middle of December the next six officers had completed their course of instruction. The German War Ministry, impressed by the promising results of the flying school, allocated a sum of 110,000 Marks for the purchase of aircraft - the first step towards a German air force had been taken. A system of pilots' licences had also been introduced in 1910, administered by the German Aviation Association and the Inspectorate of Transport for Military Troops and Civilian Pilots. The first to gain one was August Euler on 1 February 1910. To reward military pilots and to give an outward recognition of their prowess, the Kaiser introduced the Military Pilots' Badge on 27 January 1913.

World War I

With the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 the importance of aerial warfare was initially overlooked. The general staffs of the combatant nations considered it a toy of dubious use, and those in the infant air services were looked upon as "backsliders" who had found a way of avoiding "real" action. Speaking as Commander-in-Chief, Aldershot, just one month before the outbreak of war, for example, Sir Douglas Haig, later commander of the British Expeditionary Force, told a military gathering: "I hope none of you gentlemen is so foolish as to think that aeroplanes will be able to be usefully employed for reconnaissance in the air. There is only one way for a commander to get information by reconnaissance and that is by the use of cavalry."

First faltering steps

The British Royal Flying Corps (RFC) went to war with just 197 pilots. Two weeks later Sefton Brancker, Director General of Military Aeronautics, compiled a list of all those left in the country able to fly, and discovered that only 862 men held the Royal Aero Club's certificate. Of these, just 55 were sufficiently advanced to undertake active service immediately. Such meagre resources were considered no great handicap, however, as each side discounted aerial combat (no aircraft mounted any guns) and thus any losses were expected to be small. By the summer of 1915, there were only 200 pilots undergoing training in Great Britain and so it was assumed that weekend gentlemen aviators would top up the supply. In its wisdom the War Office decreed that "members of the RFC who own their own aeroplanes should be encouraged to bring them to the Central Flying School when they undergo their training". In addition, before RFC acceptance all the candidates had to obtain the necessary Aero Club certificate of competence, and had to pay the £75 fee. Entry qualifications to the RFC were eccentric: individuals were asked if they could ride a horse, a motorcycle or sail a boat. Then, after picking out strands of differently coloured wools, individuals were pronounced medically fit to fly.

During the course of the war the "knights of the air" of the fledgling air forces were to prove their military worth, especially after the introduction of synchronised machine guns, which enabled them to fire through the propellers of their aircraft. Aerial dogfights became common, and a disturbing degree of visibility often accompanied death in the air. On the ground, among thousands of other men in a vortex of deafening noise, a shot infantryman would fall unnoticed, and a few lumps of red meat would be all that remained following a direct hit by an artillery shell. High in the sky, however, encased in canvas and wood, the dying airman seem to amplify his death by falling in slow motion and often in flames, a sight watching pilots never forgot. Later in the war, it was always made worse in the minds of British pilots by the fact that the enemy had a better chance of surviving a jump. They used parachutes of British design, modified only by a cord attached to the fuselage which ripped open the 'chute when needed. Many German pilots survived, such as the aces Ernst Udet (jumped once) and Josef Jacobs (jumped twice). Nevertheless, neither the RFC nor the later Royal Air Force (RAF) were ever issued with parachutes. The fact that they weighed as much as a machine gun might have had some bearing on the matter.

Early parachute experiments

In Great Britain it was not until 1935 that serious parachute testing took place under official Air Ministry supervision, although a demonstration jump from an airship, using this design of parachute, had taken place in 1913. In addition, an unauthorised jump from the parapet of Tower Bridge in London, by Major Orde-Lees in 1917, showed that parachutes could open successfully from a height of only 46.6m (153ft).
As well as saving lives, parachutes could be put to a more offensive use. To break the deadlock of the Western Front, Brigadier-General Billy Mitchell, commander of the US Air Corps in France in 1918, proposed that parachute battalions should be raised and dropped behind the German lines at Metz. The Allied High Command concluded that such unique operations would take at least six months to plan, organise and equip. In addition, there were insufficient aircraft to transport the paratroop battalions in a single lift, combined with the problem of the immediate availability of parachutes. The idea was therefore abandoned, and the cessation of hostilities in the West in November 1918 brought the war to an end.

German aviation after World War I

By 1918 aircraft had changed the nature and conduct of war (by the Armistice, the original 197 British pilots had become 26,000), even if conservative elements within military hierarchies chose to believe otherwise. Haig, for example, saw no reason to change his general opinion on the military value of aircraft. In his personal draft for a final despatch, just two sentences were given to the air: "Though aircraft and tanks proved of enormous value, their true value is as ancillaries of infantry, artillery and cavalry." The reason he gave for this poor rating was that "the killing power of the aeroplane is still very limited as compared to the three principal arms". However, the architects of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919 acknowledged the potential of military aircraft, and its clauses stated that the German Air Force was to be dissolved, its aircraft confiscated or broken up. Furt-

hermore, the production of aircraft and aero engines in Germany was forbidden. However, these measures failed to halt developments in military aviation in Germany.
Sports clubs sprang up all over Germany after the war, which undertook to teach aeronautically minded Germans the art of flying. In addition, the Reichswehr (the 100,000-strong army allowed to the new Weimar Republic by the Treaty of Versailles), fearing that it was being left behind in military developments, secretly negotiated with the Soviet Red Army in early 1923 regarding training facilities. It finally signed an agreement in April 1925 which made Lipezk Airfield in Russia available for German military training. In 1926, besides the fighter pilot training that was already underway there, observer training began. Added to this, a special unit for testing new aircraft, weapons and equipment was also included.

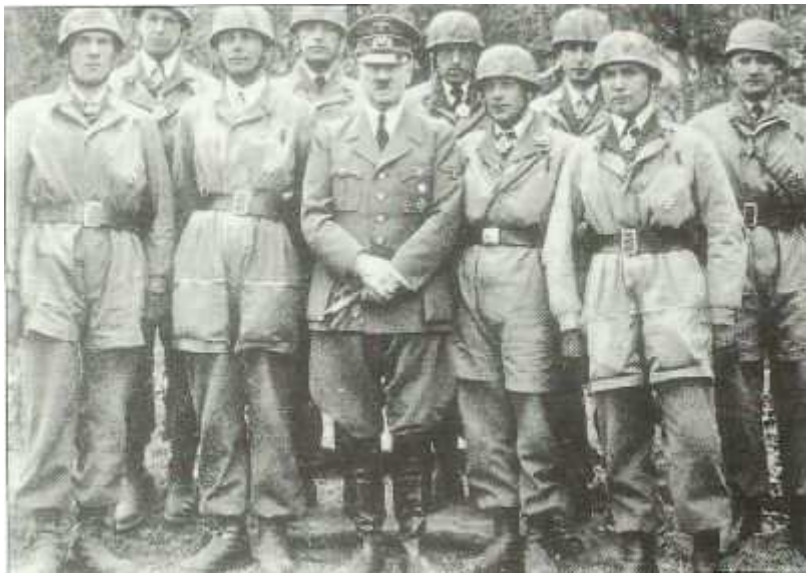
Hitler boosts the aviation arm

Between 1925 and 1933 approximately 120 officers returned from this flying school in Russia, having been fully trained as fighter pilots. Those who returned during this period maintained their skills by being incorporated as civilian pilots flying for the fledgling Lufthansa airline. The airline also employed the best veteran pilots from World War I, and so the two sets of pilots flew together and gained experience from each another.
Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party) - NSDAP or Nazi Party - became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. Within months he had assumed absolute power within Germany, and began a ruthless campaign to transform Germany into a military machine to implement his expansionist policies. In the same year he created the Deutscher Luftsport-Verband (DLV), an organisation designed to stimulate interest in aviation. The club offered its members, most of whom had previously been in the armed forces, the active disciplined life for which they yearned, to such an extent that on 10 November 1933 Hitler granted the DLV its own uniform with rank and trade insignia. Under the direction of this organi-

sation the members learned three main aeronautical skills: ballooning, glider-powered flight and parachuting. In 1933 Hitler also abandoned the school at Lipezk, and thus placed reliance on the DLV to train new personnel for his clandestine Luftwaffe (Air Force).

The Luftwaffe flexes its wings

As the Nazi Party assumed an iron grip over Germany Hitler became more confident on the international stage, and on 26 February 1935 he announced the official formation of the Luftwaffe. All the secrecy that had surrounded it was blown away. [1] The DLV was disbanded and all its former members encouraged to join the new National Sozialistische Flieger Korps (National Socialist Flying Corps) - NSFK - which was introduced in its place. In this manner the Nazi Party brought together under its control all of the country's flying clubs into one, essentially paramilitary, organisation. The NSFK could thus operate side-by-side with the fledgling Luftwaffe, and both were able to grow and gather strength together.



In April 1935, the first German fighter squadron emerged under the command of Major Ritter von Greim, bearing the title Jagdgeschwader Richthofen 2. The fighters made their first public display during the occupation of the Rhineland (which had been demilitarised under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles) on 7 March 1936. The first Luftwaffe fighter school was established at the Deutsche Verkehrsfliegeschule (German Commercial Pilots' School) at Schlelssheim, thus completing the formation of the new Luftwaffe and the NSFK. Through skilful propaganda and deception it appeared that Hitler had created a force as technically advanced as the Luftwaffe virtually out of thin air. This feat tended to add to Hitler's international diplomatic aura, the more so during the Luftwaffe's involvement in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), where its reputation as a "terror machine" was confirmed during such incidents as the bombing of Guernica in April 1937.

---

[1] The officers of Sturmabteilung Koch being presented the Ritterkreuz for their part in the assaults on Eben Emael and the bridges over the Albert Canal on 10 May !940.The photo was taken on 16 May at Fuhrerhauptquartier 'Felsennest', 50km south-west of Bonn. From left to right: Hauptmann Walter Koch, Oberleutnant Rudolf Witzig, Oberleutnant Gustav Altmann. Other officers present are: Oberleutnant Otto Zierach, Oberarzt Dr. Rolf Jager, Leutnant Egon Delica, Leutnant Helmut Ringler, Leutnant Joachim Meissner, Leutnant Gerhard Schacht.

have to overcome the Belgian and Dutch defences. To do so Student only had 4500 trained paratroopers. Of these, 4000 were used against Holland and the rest against Belgium. The key to cracking the defences in Belgium were the bridges over the Albert Canal and the fortress of Eben Emael, which was constructed of concrete and steel and whose artillery dominated the whole area. Against Holland Student deployed the majority of his 7th Flieger Division and General Graf von Sponeck's 22nd Airlanding Division. Dutch defences rested on three successive lines: a lightly fortified delaying position at the border; the main "Grebbe-Peel line", which made use of natural defensive barriers; and "Fortress Holland" - Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht and The Hague - which was protected by estuaries, rivers and flooded areas.
Bearing in mind that there had never been a large-scale airborne operation in warfare before, Student may have been tempted to minimise risks by using his men to support the ground attack directly. However, what he proposed was radical: to use his men to crack open "Fortress Holland" and paralyse the nerve centres of the Dutch government, thereby destroying the Dutch will to continue fighting. Though this plan was opposed by Luftwaffe Chief of Staff Jeschonnek, it was approved by a delighted Hitler.

Student's plan

The operation against Holland had two elements. First, von Sponeck's division would land at the airfields at Valkenburg, Ockenburg and Ypenburg after they had been taken by parachute assault, then two infantry regiments would enter The Hague and capture the government and royal family, or at least disrupt Dutch defence plans. Second, south of Rotterdam Student's division would land by parachute to seize crossings over the major water obstacles that protected "Fortress Holland's" southern flank. An infantry regiment would also airland at Waalhaven to provide a reserve.
The campaign in the West began on 10 May, and wherever the Fallschirmjäger landed in Holland they encountered stiff resistance from a Dutch Army determined to defend its country. However, Student's well-trained men captured all but one of their objectives, and the unit that landed at Waalhaven captured the bridge intact. Paratroopers landed in Rotterdam's football stadium, and then advanced and captured the Meuse bridge. The Dordrecht and Moerdijk bridges were captured intact and held in the face of heavy resistance. After two days the leading panzers of General Georg von Küchler's Eighteenth Army reached the intact Moerdijk bridge - "Fortress Holland" had been cracked.
Von Sponeck's 22 Division had a tougher time north of Rotterdam. He had just enough paratroopers to take the three airfields, and only 15 minutes between the parachute drops and the arrival of Junkers bringing in his infantry. Things began to go wrong from the start. The flat, patchwork landscape confused the pilots, who dropped the paratroopers wide of their objectives. Thus when the Junkers touched down at Valkenburg they did so in the face of intense fire. The aircraft got bogged down in soft sand and couldn't be moved, thus successive waves had to turn back. At Ypenburg, 11 of the 13 Junkers carrying the first assault company of the 65th Regiment were shot down by antiaircraft fire. Wrecks of aircraft littered the ground at Ockenburg, where a similar story unfolded. Nevertheless, enough troops had been landed to adversely affect Dutch morale and contribute to their surrender on 14 May.
The fortress of Eben Emael and the bridges over the Albert Canal had to be taken to allow the advancing German Sixth Army to pass unhindered into Belgium. Student later

wrote: "The Albert Canal venture was Hitler's own idea. I used 500 men under Captain Koch. The commander of the Sixth Army, General von Reichenau, and his chief of staff General Paulus, both capable generals, regarded the undertaking as an adventure in which they had no faith." A parachute assault against Eben Emael had been ruled out due to the limited space and the chance of some men missing the drop zone. It was thus carried out in gliders. The attack on the fortress and bridges was planned and practised in utmost secrecy. [3]

The assignment went to Hauptmann Walter Koch, who was to form a Parachute Assault Detachment from men of his 1st Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment, and Oberleutnant Rudolf Witzig's pioneer company from the 2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment. Group Granite would assault the fortress. This unit consisted of two officers and 83 men, 11of whom were glider pilots. Group Granite's 11 gliders and their Ju 52 tows took off from two airfields outside Cologne at 04:30 hours on the morning of 10 May 1940. They were released inside German territory and were left to glide to their target. Only nine gliders landed on top of Eben Emael at 05:20 hours, the other two, including Witzig's, had to abort shortly after take-off and land back in Germany. Witzig later reached the target with a new tow.

Success at Eben Emael

The defenders were taken completely by surprise, which turned to consternation when the paratroopers started to blow open the gun emplacements with hollow-charge explosives. They blasted their way through the concrete, disabled the guns and neutralised the garrison.

---

[3] Fort Eben Emael, position in Albert Canal

Meanwhile, paratroop drops secured the bridges at Vroenhoven, Cannes and Veldvezelt with relatively small losses, thereby breaching the Belgian defence line and allowing the Sixth Army's units to pour across. The breakthrough in Belgium was not the decisive stroke in the campaign in the West, but it had a vital effect: it drew the Allies' attention in the wrong direction and attracted the most mobile part of their forces to the area, which meant they could not be deployed to meet the greater threat that then developed in the south.

For the Fallschirmjäger the campaign had been a vindication of their doctrine and training. This was especially true in Belgium, where on the entire invasion front the bridges were blown up by the defenders except where airborne troops were used. But the campaign had an unhappy footnote. General Student and his staff had flown to the captured Waalhaven airfield and had then proceeded into Rotterdam on 14 May, where he conducted peace negotiations before the Dutch capitulation on the same day. It was during these negotiations that Student suffered a non-fatal gunshot wound to the head inflicted by a passing unit of the SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, which was unaware of the surrender and raced into the city firing wildly at all and sundry. And as the Dutch were signing the surrender terms, Rotterdam was bombed due to a breakdown in communication between ground forces and the Luftwaffe. Nevertheless, the campaign in the West had been a resounding triumph for Hilter's sky warriors.

The Invasion of Crete

The conquest of Crete stands as a lasting tribute to the professionalism, courage and tenacity of Germany's airborne forces. But victory was bought at a heavy price, and when the battle was over a shocked Führer, who was not usually unduly worried by losses, forbade any more large-scale airborne operations.

Following the successful conclusion of the campaign in the West, Hitler turned his attention to the East: the invasion and conquest of the Soviet Union. Before he could so, though, he needed to secure his southern flank. Hungary and Romania were German satellites, and by using severe diplomatic pressure Hitler was able to bring Yugoslavia into the Axis alliance. However, the deployment of 57,000 British troops to Greece encouraged an anti-German coup in Yugoslavia in late March 1941, and thus the Führer was forced into a Balkan campaign. For the airborne forces it would mean their biggest and most celebrated operation. But beforehand they would carry out a smaller operation that was a complete success.

The Germans invaded Yugoslavia and Greece on 6 April 1941, and immediately the Blitzkrieg began to sweep all before it. In Greece, by mid-April, the German Army was advancing in three columns: one from Larissa, one through Thebes towards Elensia and Athens, and the third from Larissa and Arta towards Lepanto. Greek resistance had all but collapsed and the British under General Maitland Wilson were withdrawing through the Corinthian Isthmus towards the Peloponnesus. The Corinthian Isthmus is cut by a canal whose sides are deep and steep. It was decided to capture the Corinthian pass to establish a bridgehead to assist the crossing of German ground troops and cut off the British retreat.

The Fallschirmjäger units assigned to the mission were two battalions of the 2nd Parachute Regiment, reinforced by one parachute engineer platoon, artillery and one parachute medical company. On 25 April, more than 400 Ju 52s and numerous gliders were transfe-

rred from the Plovdiv area in Bulgaria to the airfield at Larissa. The drop was scheduled for 07:00 hours on 26 April. [4]
The aircraft flew over the Pindus Mountains and dropped to an altitude of 45.7m (150ft) over the Gulf of Corinth, which was covered in a haze that masked their approach. The pilots pulled up to a height of 122m (400ft), reduced speed and released their loads above the objectives. The first to land were the gliders, which touched down on both sides of the isthmus. The parachute troops jumped at the same time, landed north of the canal, seized the bridge and captured a large number of British troops in the process.
The aim of seizing the bridge intact had been achieved, but then a stray anti-aircraft shell detonated the demolition charges on the structure after German engineers had cut the detonating cord. The bridge blew up, killing several paratroopers in the process. However, on the same day engineers constructed a temporary span adjacent to the one that had been destroyed to allow traffic between the mainland and the Peloponnesus to flow unhindered. If the drop had been made earlier, large numbers of the British Expeditionary Force (which had completed its evacuation by 27 April) would have been trapped.

Objective - Crete

After the fall of Greece all eyes turned to Crete. For both sides the island was of importance: for the British to maintain naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean from the base at Suda, while for the Germans Crete would provide an ideal forward base for offensive air and naval operations in the Mediterranean. It would be able to support Axis ground offensives in Egypt, and its capture would deny Allied aircraft potential bases for striking at Germany's Ploesti oil fields in Romania.
General Student, commander of XI Flieger (Air) Corps, had advocated using the whole of Germany's airborne forces to take Crete and Cyprus. Oberstleutnant Freiherr von der Heydte, who fought on Crete, relates the story: "This suggestion was submitted to Göring by the Commander-in-Chief of Luftflotte IV [General Alexander Löhr] - under whose command was General Student - on 15 April, and Göring ordered General Student to report to him on 20 April. On 21 April Hitler saw Student, and on 25 April Directive 28 ordered the immediate preparation of Operation Merkur - the surprise attack on Crete."
All units to take part in the operation were assembled within two weeks. However, because of logistical problems the date of the attack was put back to 20 May. For the attack

[4] German light 2cm Flak 30 airfield at Maleme, Crete 21 May 1941

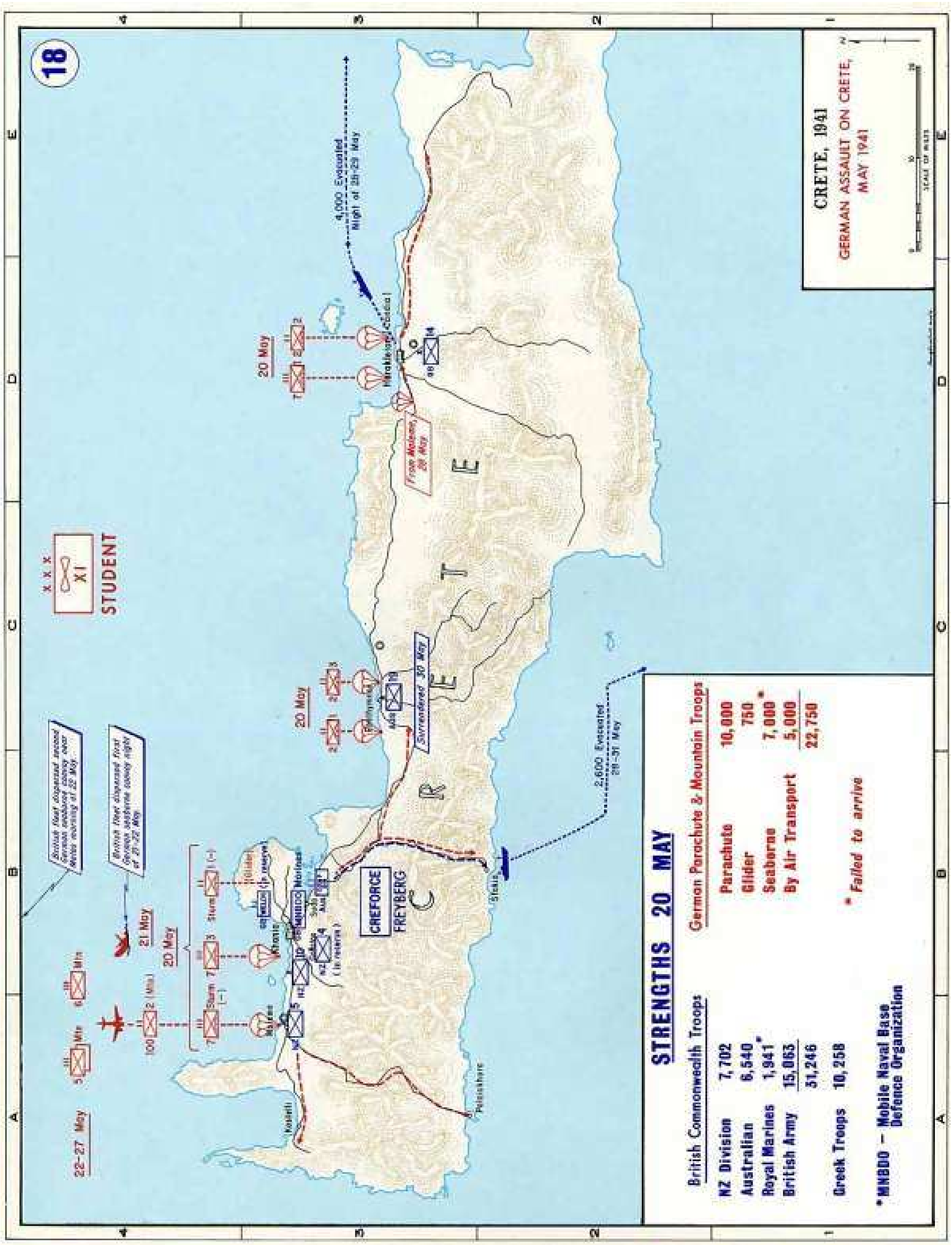
Student deployed 500 Ju 52 aircraft and 80 DFS 230 gliders to airlift the attacking forces from the airfields in Greece. The assault force consisted of the Luftlande-Sturmregiment (Airlanding Assault Regiment) under Generalmajor Meindl, 7th Flieger Division (Generalleutnant Süssmann) and the 5th Mountain Division (Generalmajor Ringel). The latter replaced the 22nd Airlanding Division, which could not be transferred in time from Romania, and was in any case guarding the Ploesti oil fields.
Crete itself is 256km (160 miles) long and between 12.8-56km (8-35 miles) wide. The interior of the island is barren and covered by eroded mountains. Water is scarce and roads are few. The only usable port on the south coast is at Sfakia. The main towns on the island are in the north: Maleme, Canea, Retimo and Heraklion. For the Royal Navy, the only adequate port was in Suda Bay, also in the north.

Risk assessment

The original Luftwaffe plan proposed airborne landings in the western part of the island between the airfield at Maleme and Canea (the location of various bridges, roads and antiaircraft positions), followed by an eastward thrust. It meant German airborne forces could concentrate within a small area and achieve local air and ground superiority relatively quickly. The main disadvantage was that it might lead to extensive mountain fighting, and the enemy would remain in possession of the Heraklion and Retimo airfields to the east. The plan of XI Flieger Corps advocated simultaneous parachute drops at seven points, including Maleme, Canea, Retimo and Heraklion. This plan had the advantage of capturing all strategic points on the island at once. A subsequent mopping-up operation would clear the rest of the island. However, the operation was risky because the units dropped would be dispersed over a wide area, making them vulnerable to counterattacks. The plan involved Student's so-called "oil spot tactics", whereby a number of small airheads would be created in the area to be attacked, at first without any point of main effort. These airheads would be continually reinforced until they finally linked up. A postwar German assessment of airborne operations described how they nearly failed on Crete: "At one time, the whole operation was within a hair's breadth of disaster because the airheads, which were too weak and too far apart, were being whittled down."
The Kriegsmarine's (German Navy's) Admiral Schüster was responsible for landing reinforcements of troops and heavy equipment by sea, but had no German naval units under his command for his task. His transport vessels were small caiques that had been captured during the Greek campaign and were assembled in the port of Piraeus.

The final plan

The attack plan finally adopted by Göring was a compromise solution: 10,000 troops were to be dropped by parachute, 750 transported by glider, 5000 airlanded in aircraft and 7000 brought in by sea. The first wave had two objectives. First, men of the 1st, 2nd 3rd and 4th Battalions of the Luftlande-Sturmregiment would land at Maleme airfield in gliders and by parachute. Second, the 3rd Parachute Regiment would drop near Canea, the capital of Crete, and take it, and also seize the port of Suda.
The second wave would come in some eight hours later on two other objectives: Fallschirmjäger of the 2nd Parachute Regiment would drop on Retimo and its airfield, and the


18
CRETE, 1941
GERMAN ASSAULT ON CRETE, MAY 1941
STUDENT
XI
CREFORCE
FREYBERG
22-27 May
21 May
20 May
4,000 Evacuated Night of 28-29 May
2,600 Evacuated 28-31 May
Surrendered 30 May
From Maleme 29 May
Maleme
Kastelli
Sfakia
STRENGTHS 20 MAY
British Commonwealth Troops
NZ Division 7,702
Australian 6,540
Royal Marines 1,941*
British Army 15,063
31,246
Greek Troops 10,258
*MNBDO – Mobile Naval Base Defence Organization
German Parachute & Mountain Troops
Parachute 10,000
Glider 750
Seaborne 7,000*
By Air Transport 5,000
22,750
*Failed to arrive

Group North's Eighteenth Army.
The Fallschirmjäger were deployed to the east of the city on the River Neva, where Red Army troops of the Volkhov Front were pushing west to relieve Leningrad. The fighting on the Neva in October 1941 was bitter, but the paratroopers managed to hold off the Soviet attacks. The 7th Flieger Division's headquarters arrived at the front in mid-October, and the Parachute Engineer Battalion shortly after. The latter went straight into action in woods on the west side of the Neva. For the next two months the Red Army battered the Fallschirmjäger, to no avail. In December 1941, the Fallschirmjäger in the Leningrad area were pulled out of the line and sent back to Germany for rest.
The 2nd Parachute Regiment, a battalion of the Assault Regiment and units of the Anti-tank and Machine Gun Battalions were sent to the Ukraine to bolster Army Group South. This force - Kampfgruppe Sturm, commanded by Oberst Alfred Sturm - defended a sector along the River Mius around the town of Charzysk throughout the winter of 1941 and into early 1942.During this period the Russians and the weather inflicted heavy casualties on the paras.

Battles of attrition

The new year witnessed a number of Soviet offensives, against which the paratroopers showed their true worth. As élite troops they were ideally suited to holding ground in the face of overwhelming odds, as they had displayed on Crete. This certainly endeared them to Hitler, who was obsessed with not yielding an inch of territory. Kampfgruppe Sturm held all Soviet assaults, and Kampfgruppe Meindl (formed from the Assault Regiment's 1st Battalion, units of the Artillery Regiment and the Regimental Headquarters) was rushed south to reinforce Sturm's men. A series of battles developed in the Yuknov sector which lasted for weeks, with the paras holding back the Soviets and inflicting heavy casualties on the attackers. Once the attacks abated, Kampfgruppe Meindl was sent north to an area around the River Volkhov, southeast of Leningrad. In March 1942, the 2nd Parachute Regiment was also moved to the Volkhov Front, being placed under the command of the 21st Infantry Division.
The Soviet forces of the Volkhov and Northwest Fronts launched a massive offensive east of Leningrad to try to break the siege on 8 May. The 2nd Parachute Regiment, located in and around the small town of Lipovka, put up a desperate resistance and threw back waves of Soviet tanks and infantry. The paras held, but were so depleted that in July they were back in Germany for some well-earned rest.
In the summer of 1942 the majority of the 7th Flieger Division was resting and refitting in Normandy, where a 4th Parachute Regiment was added to its order of battle to make up for the transfer of the 2nd Parachute Regiment to North Africa. This unit was commanded by Oberst Erich Walther.
During this period OKW devised a plan for an airdrop in southern Russia to capture a number of oil fields. This operation was cancelled in September, though, and the 7th Flieger Division was allocated to Army Group Centre. The division moved into positions near Smolensk, being tasked with defending a 90km (56-mile) sector north of the Smolensk-Vitebsk highway. The winter was fairly quiet, as the Wehrmacht and Red Army were locked in combat in and around Stalingrad farther south. The lull lasted until March 1943.

Expansion of the airborne arm

At the end of the month the Soviets opened their offensive against the positions held by the 7th Flieger Division. Massive artillery barrages and infantry and tank attacks failed to overrun the Fallschirmjäger. Generalmajor Richard Heidrich was allowed to pull his men out of the line once the attacks had petered out. Transferred to southern France, it was joined by the newly raised 2nd Parachute Division, and both divisions were grouped under XI Flieger Corps. The 7th Flieger Division now became the1st Parachute Division. All other para units fighting on the Eastern Front had been withdrawn for refitting by July 1943, but the worsening situation in Russia meant that it would not be long before they were again sent east.

Away from the front there was a major expansion of the German airborne arm in 1943. As well as the two divisions mentioned above, the 3rd Parachute Division was formed in October 1943 and the 4th Parachute Division was created in November 1943. The new divisions were needed: by end of the year the Germans had lost the Battle of Kursk and the strategic initiative in the East.

In early November 1943, the 2nd Parachute Division was ordered to the Eastern Front to take up positions near the Russian-held town of Zhitomir. Arriving between 17-27 November 1943 under the command of Generalleutnant Gustav Wilke, it was placed under the command of XXXXII Corps and deployed east of Zhitomir. The Red Army aim was to take Kiev, destroy the Fourth Panzer Army, seize communications centres west of the Dnieper, including Zhitomir, and eventually annihilate the entire German southern wing. By December the Red Army had massed a large force northeast of the city to breach the German defences and reach the Dniester, though German units managed to plug the gaps created by the Soviet advance. On 15 December the 2nd Parachute Division was airlifted to Kirovograd and put into the line at Klinzy. It was supported by the 11th Panzer Division and the 286th Self-Propelled Brigade. Fierce fighting developed around Novgorodka and the surrounding hills. By 23 December the division had stabilised the line, but had taken many casualties.

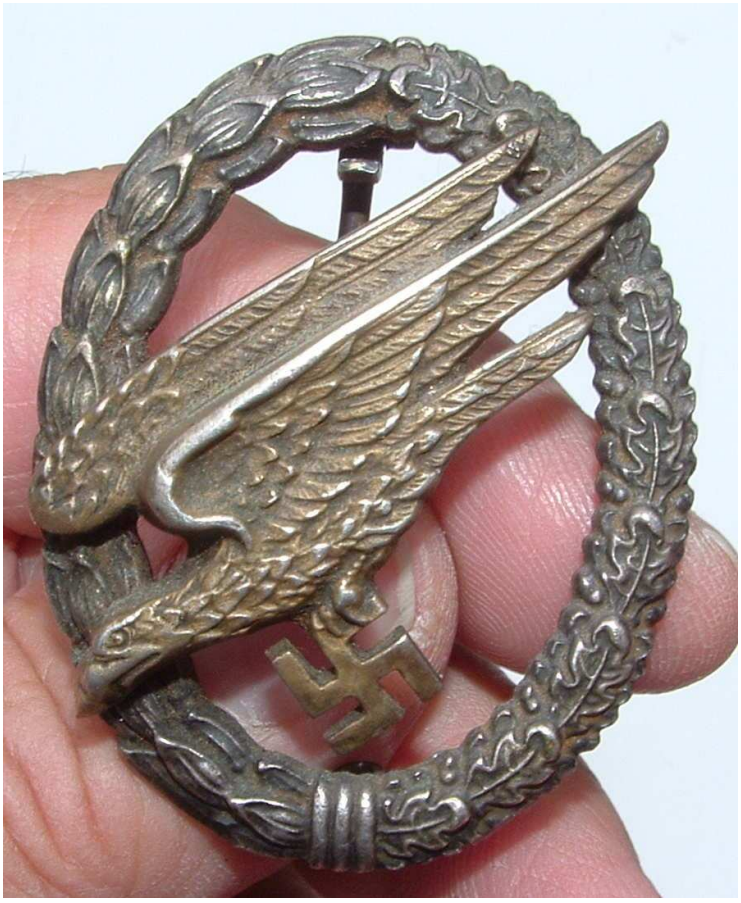
In early January 1944 the Red Army renewed its offensive against the 2nd Parachute Division, and numbers began to tell. The 2nd Battalion of 5th Regiment was destroyed, and by 6 January the 7th, 5th and 2nd Regiments had been forced to pull out of the Novgorodka area due to Red Army pressure. Taking up positions near Kirovograd, the paras dug in and waited for the next attack. It came in March, when Russian forces near Kiev struck south towards the 2nd Parachute Division's positions. By the last week of March the Fallschirmjäger had been forced across the River Bug where they set up defensive positions on the opposite bank. Being pushed back all the time, by May they were on the River Dniester. They had been decimated in the fighting, and so at the end of the month the division was transferred to Germany for rest and refitting. It was the last time that the 2nd Parachute Division would see action on the Eastern Front.

The only other paratrooper unit to see action in 1944 was the 21st Parachute Pioneer Battalion under the command of Major Rudolf Witzig of Eben Emael fame. In mid-1944 Army Group Centre had been shattered by the Red Army's Operation "Bagration", and by July the Soviets were approaching the Baltic. On 25 July 1944, Witzig's engineers were positioned on the road between Dunaburg and Kovno in Lithuania. The Soviet tanks, supported by infantry and artillery, attacked the next day. Despite fighting heroically the engineers were soon encircled, and Witzig was forced to retreat to the main German lines.

Witzig's battalion stayed on the Eastern Front until October 1944, but by then it had been decimated by combat and was disbanded, the survivors being sent to other parachute units.
By the beginning of 1945 the Red Army was about to commence the final operations that would bring about victory on the Eastern Front. The Wehrmacht scraped together its last reserves for this final campaign, but at this stage of the war many units were very depleted both in personnel and equipment. The newly raised 9th and 10th Parachute Divisions, for example, were both understrength. The 9th was deployed outside Stettin on the Baltic, and in April it was containing a Russian bridgehead on the west bank of the River Oder. On the 16th the 9th was subjected to an intense artillery barrage, and from then on its units began to disintegrate. The 2nd Battalion, 27th Regiment, and the 3rd Battalion, 26th Regiment, were wiped out. The rest of the division pulled back, but was then overpowered by Soviet tanks.
By late April 1945 the Red Army had surrounded Berlin itself. What was left of the 9th Parachute Division withdrew to the central district of the city to defend the Führerbunker and surrounding ministry buildings. When the city surrendered the remnants of the division went into Soviet captivity.
The 10th Parachute Division was sent to southern Austria to contain a developing crisis early in April 1945: Soviet forces were flooding through Hungary, and Army Group South desperately needed reinforcements. On 3 April advance units of the division reached Graz. Digging in around the town of Feldbach, the paras held off T-34 tanks with infantry antitank weapons and 88mm guns. However, losses were high and the Artillery Battalion was all but destroyed.
On 27 April, the 10th Parachute Division was pulled out of the line (though the 30th Regiment remained in the Danube Valley) and transported by railway to Bruenn in the Sudetenland to join what was left of the Eighteenth Army. The remnants of the 10th Parachute Division made their last stand to the north of Bruenn, where they were wiped out. The 30th Regiment managed to surrender to US forces, but was subsequently handed over to the Russians. The Fallschirmjäger war on the Eastern Front was over.

Battle for Italy I

As Italy started to waver as a member of the Axis, then collapsed altogether in the autumn of 1943, Hitler was forced to commit more and more troops and material to protect his southern flank. These resources included the 1st and 4th Parachute Divisions, which fought superbly in defence of Sicily and the Italian mainland.
Before the campaign in Africa had ended, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met at Casablanca, Morocco, to devise future military strategy. The next target agreed upon was Sicily. It was not the first choice, and it represented a compromise between US and British strategists. Britain had long-standing political and strategic interests in the Mediterranean, and believed that Sicily's conquest would reopen Allied sealanes to the eastern Mediterranean, provide a base from which to launch further offensives in the region, and might provoke the war-weary Italians into dropping out of the war.
US strategists, led by Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, were keen on a direct thrust against Nazi Germany, specifically a cross-Channel attack. However, the two Allied leaders wished to divert Germany's attention away from the war against the



Soviet Union, and were anxious to exploit the momentum of the impending victory in North Africa. In addition, the mass of men and equipment that would be available after the end of the war in Africa made an operation in the Mediterranean attractive and logical. After considering actions in Greece, the Balkans, Crete and Sardinia, the Casablanca conference chose Sicily as the next phase of the war against the Axis.
General Dwight D. Eisenhower was selected as the supreme Allied commander for Operation "Husky", the codename for the attack on Sicily, with General Sir Harold Alexander as his deputy and actual commander of Allied land forces during the campaign. Alexander's Fifteenth Army Group would direct Lieutenant-General George S. Patton's US Seventh Army and General Sir Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army, the veteran formation of the North African war. [7]
The invasion took place along the island's southeastern shore due to the preponderance of favourable beaches, ports and airfields. The key strategic objective of the campaign was the port of Messina in the northeastern corner of the island. The main transit point between Sicily and the Italian mainland, it is surrounded by extremely rugged terrain with narrow beaches. Moreover, it had been heavily fortified and was beyond the range at which Allied Africa-based fighters could provide effective air cover for bombers. It was therefore ruled out as an initial objective.

The plan for the invasion of Sicily

The final Allied plan involved seven divisions: the Eighth Army would land four divisions, an independent brigade and a Commando force from the Pachino Peninsula to just south of the port of Syracuse (a glider landing would assist the amphibious troops in taking Syracuse itself); the Seventh Army would land three divisions in the Gulf of Gela, which would be aided by paratroopers from the US 505th Parachute Infantry Regimental Combat Team and the 3rd Battalion, US 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Once asho-

[7] Fallschirmjäger Badge

re, the Eighth Army would drive north to take Augusta, Catania, the airfields at Gerbini and finally Messina. The Seventh Army, in a supporting role, would take airfields between Licata and Comiso, then protect the west flank of the Eighth Army as it headed towards Messina.
The Axis defenders were under the overall command of General Alfredo Guzzoni's Italian Sixth Army. The 200,000 Italian troops were organised into six coastal divisions, four infantry divisions and a variety of local defence forces. Many were poorly trained and equipped, and their morale was questionable. The 30,000 German troops were grouped in the 15th Panzergrenadier Division and the élite Hermann Göring Panzer Division.

The invasion of Sicily

Guzzoni realised his only chance of success was to crush the Allies on the shore before they could consolidate their beachhead. He therefore spread his coastal units in a thin line around the island's perimeter and placed two Italian infantry divisions in the island's western and southeastern corners. He wanted to concentrate the German divisions in the southeast, too, but Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Hitler's representative in Italy, transferred the bulk of the 15th Panzergrenadier Division to western Sicily before the invasion to cover the eventuality of the Allies landing there. As a result, only the Hermann Göring Division was in a position to launch a counterattack during the first few hours of the invasion.
The invasion took place during the night of 9/10 July 1943. Opposition from the dispirited and ill-equipped Italian coastal units was negligible, and by the end of the first day the Eighth Army was on its way to Augusta, having taken Syracuse easily. Resistance in the US sector was not much stronger. The next two days saw resistance stiffen as Guzzoni committed the Hermann Göring Division, but by the 13th the Eighth Army had still advanced as far as Vizzini in the west and Augusta in the east. There, progress slowed due to a combination of difficult terrain and the arrival of the 1st Parachute Division.
The 1st Parachute Division, under the command of Generalmajor Richard Heidrich, was formed from the 7th Flieger Division in May 1943. From the end of May it was stationed in Flers near Avignon, France, coming under the command of XI Flieger Corps, Army Group D. On 11 July the division was ordered to prepare for a move to Sicily, and the next day the first units were airlifted to Rome. These units were the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 3rd Parachute Regiment, the 4th Parachute Regiment and the division's machine-gun battalion. Once they arrived in Rome, the 4th Parachute Regiment and the machine-gun battalion were loaded onto gliders and Ju 52 aircraft and dropped around Syracuse and Catania. It would be two days before the 3rd Parachute Regiment was despatched to the island, while the 1st Parachute Regiment was sent to a holding area near Naples to await further orders.

The Fallschirmjäger in Sicily

On Sicily, the German paratroopers set about preparing defensive positions. The machine-gun battalion, backed up by Fallschirmjäger antitank and artillery elements, dug in around Primasole Bridge over the River Simeto in the east of the island. The bridge was an important objective for both sides, highlighted by the fact that several hours after the German paratroopers arrived their adversaries in the British 1st Parachute Brigade (under

the command of Brigadier C. W. Lathbury and consisting of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd Battalions and 21st Independent Company - Pathfinders) jumped in on 13 July. A savage battle began, in which the British paras were forced to retreat with some loss.
Fallschirmjäger of the 3rd Parachute Regiment jumped onto Catania airfield on 14 July, which at the time was under fire from Allied aircraft and naval artillery. Meanwhile, the men of the Fallschirmjäger machine-gun battalion, expecting relief, mistook British paras for their own side, and in the confusion the British captured Primasole Bridge. However, the machine-gun battalion and the newly arrived 3rd Parachute Regiment mounted a counterattack a few hours later which retook the bridge.The Germans crossed the river to the east, and under attack from three directions the remnants of the 1st Parachute Brigade were forced to withdraw into a small perimeter to the south.

The loss of Primasole Bridge

During the night of 14/15 July the two Fallschirmjäger engineer companies jumped onto Catania airfield. They marched to Primasole Bridge and took up positions on the south side of the bridge. During the morning the British, with the support of tanks of the 4th Armoured Brigade, attacked the bridge again. Again they were flung back by a combination of antitank, machine-gun and mortar fire. The paras came back again, this time reinforced by troops of the Durham Light Infantry, but again they were beaten off by the Germans. The latter had brought up an 88mm gun, but this was subsequently destroyed by intensive Allied artillery fire. The engineers on the south side of the bridge were badly mauled, and by the afternoon Fallschirmjäger casualties had reached a point whereby further defence of the bridge was untenable. Another British attack finally wrested the bridge from the paras. Two days later the Fallschirmjäger retook Primasole Bridge, before finally losing it on the 18th.
As the remnants of the two engineer companies amalgamated with the 4th Parachute Regiment and retreated, the 3rd Parachute Regiment was cut off and embroiled in fighting around the town of Carlenini. Breaking through the British encirclement, the unit managed to reach the relative safety of German lines. But now time was beginning to run out for the Germans in Sicily. By 24 July the US Seventh Army was in control of the entire western half of the island. Most Italian units were showing little inclination to fight, and even less so when the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was deposed on 25 July and replaced by Marshal Pietro Badoglio.
Though fighting continued in Sicily, de facto Italian participation ended. Those Axis forces still fighting had decided to make a stand in the island's rugged northeast corner, around the strongpoints along the so-called Etna Line, and Guzzoni still talked of putting up resistance. But his units were disintegrating, and Berlin made the decision to withdraw from the island. From this point General Hans Hube, commander of the newly formed XIV Panzer Corps, led Axis units in Sicily. He began to pull his forces back to evacuate them across the Strait of Messina to the Italian mainland. The paratroopers were detailed to plug any gaps in the Axis line as the evacuation commenced. Elements of the 1st Parachute Regiment were evacuated on 11 August, while all other Fallschirmjäger units had left the island by the 17th, only hours before the first Allied units entered Messina.
With the relatively easy victory on Sicily, Allied planners began to look at an invasion of the Italian mainland. Eisenhower authorised a landing by the Eighth Army, codenamed "Baytown", on 16 August. The assault would take place across the Strait of Messina bet-

been held in July. And such were his logistical problems that he needed to defeat the Eighth Army decisively to prevent the collapse of his Afrika Corps.
Tobruk had been a disappointment, being able to handle only 610 tonnes (600 tons) a day. Moreover, British bombing raids in early August reduced its capacity still further, and British naval and air units intercepted and destroyed thousands of tons of Axis military cargo before they reached port. From 1-20 August, Axis forces used twice as many supplies as successfully arrived in North Africa. This meant that German units alone were understrength by 16,000 troops, 210 tanks and around 1600 other vehicles by the end of September. The men of the Ramcke Brigade were some of the 24,000 troops and 11,000 Luftwaffe personnel airlifted to North Africa in Ju 52s during July and August, but these men could not be supplied with heavy weapons, artillery, troop carriers, tanks or ammunition. In fact, they imposed a greater strain on already overstretched essential items.
For the Eighth Army, under the command of Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery, the reverse was true. During August it received 386 tanks, 446 artillery pieces, 6600 vehicles and 73,200 tonnes (72,000 tons) of supplies. Rommel was placed in an uncomfortable position: he could await the British attack with all its overwhelming superiority, or he could forestall it by striking as soon as possible (his "window of opportunity" would exist until September, when the balance of forces would be so heavily weighed against him that his chances of mounting an offensive would be gone).
His plan was to launch a feint attack in the centre while his armour would outflank British positions to the south, after which Axis forces would wheel north and head for the sea, encircling enemy forces in the El Alamein position. An integral part of the operation involved the Ramcke Brigade, which, together with the Italian Folgore Parachute Divi-

sion, was to capture the bridges over the Nile at Alexandria and Cairo.
Rommel's attempt to break through at El Alamein resulted in the Battle of Alam Halfa (31 August-7 September), where his tanks were defeated by a combination of fuel shortages and the tactics of the Eighth Army's new commander. There was no parachute drop on the Nile, and German Fallschirmjäger took no part in the action.
In late October the Ramcke Brigade was part of the Afrika Corps commanded by General Hans Stumme (Rommel, ill, had flown back to Germany), and was deployed on the Axis right to meet the coming British offensive. It came on the 23rd, when 1000 guns opened the 2nd Battle of El Alamein. Though Axis forces fought with skill and determination, Montgomery's superiority in tanks and men, plus the acute Axis shortage of fuel, began to wear down Italian and German armoured strength. By 2 November, for example, only 35 German tanks remained in action. With his fuel nearly spent and most of his tanks and artillery knocked out, Rommel, having flown back from Europe, decided to retreat. He had started the battle with 104,000 men, 500 tanks and 1200 guns. At the end of the battle he had lost 59,000 men killed, wounded or captured, almost all of his tanks and 400 guns. Ramcke's men had been involved in heavy fighting during the battle, but once the order to withdraw was given the brigade was effectively abandoned. Indeed, all those Axis infantry who had no transport were quickly overrun by the Eighth Army. The Ramcke Brigade had no organic transport, but rather than surrender its commander decided to break out to the west. The breakout cost him 450 men alone, but in the process the brigade captured a British supply column which provided it with trucks and supplies. It was an amazing piece of good luck, and enabled 600 men of the Ramcke Brigade to rejoin the Afrika Corps, though not before an arduous trip across the desert.
The Allied Operation "Torch" landings commenced on 8 November 1942, designed to seize Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia as bases for further operations against the Axis alliance. In response, Hitler began sending German troops by air into Tunisia (1000 men per day would arrive between 17 November and the end of December). Although the amount was relatively small, it was enough to check the leading troops of the Allied First Army when they reached the immediate approach to Tunis two-and-a-half weeks after the amphibious landings. The result was a five-month deadlock in the mountainous region covering Bizerta and Tunis.
A small part of these reinforcements were the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 5th Parachute Regiment under the command of Oberstleutnant Walter Koch, the hero of Eben Emael. They were flown into Tunis to protect its airfields and take up defensive positions to the west and south of the city. Koch, however, fell ill in Tunisia and had to be ferried back to a German hospital. The 5th Parachute Regiment was closely followed by the 11th Parachute Pioneer Battalion under the command of Major Rudolf Witzig. This unit was an airborne light engineering battalion composed of three field companies (each of three platoons and a machine-gun section) and a signals platoon. First raised in 1942, its strength on arrival in Africa was 716 men. It was used to bolster the Axis defences to the west of Tunis, directly in front of the Allied approach route. On 17 November, the battalion made contact with the advance guard of the Allied spearhead and a series of battles developed.
Over the next few days Witzig's men were slowly reinforced, allowing them to pull out of the line and become a reserve unit. Parts of his command then received special training and were given the job of slipping behind enemy lines to carry out reconnaissance and gather intelligence. This intelligence led to the last parachute drop to be carried out by the Fallschirmjäger in North Africa.

The men of the 3rd Company, 11th Parachute Pioneer Battalion, were chosen for the operation and began immediate training. The objectives were airfields and bridges behind Allied lines in the Souk el Arba and Souk el Ahras areas, which were being used by the Allies to transport supplies and reinforcements to the front for an assault on Tunis itself. Though the idea of an airdrop was militarily sound, the actual operation was a disaster.
The Ju 52 aircraft took off from airfields outside Tunis in early December 1942. The night was cold and windy and there was no moon. The aircraft were manned by inexperienced and poorly trained pilots, and consequently the Fallschirmjäger were dropped well away from their targets. This meant a long walk once on the ground. In fact the paratroopers never reached their targets, for as soon as they landed they were rounded up by the many British patrols in the area. Within a few days all the pioneers had been captured, many suffering from the effects of the sun. The airborne operation to disrupt the Allied advance on Tunis had been a fiasco (following the fall of Tunisia, the 11th Pioneer Battalion was reformed around a cadre of survivors of the North African campaign, the unit being expanded to become the 21st Parachute Pioneer Regiment, which fought on the Eastern Front and in the West in 1944-45).

Another airborne failure

The failure of the parachute drop did not deter the High Command, who authorised another airborne assault a few days later. This was carried out by gliders on 26 December 1942, when men of the Parachute Company of the Brandenburg Regiment took off to destroy bridges being used as supply routes by the British. This assault also ended in disaster. Some of the gliders were shot down as they passed over enemy lines, while others were downed as they approached their targets. Most of the men were killed in the operation.
At the beginning of 1943 the Axis strategic position in Tunisia was grim. To the west were the British First Army and US II Corps, which were shadowed by Colonel-General Jürgen von Arnim's Fifth Panzer Army. Rommel's Panzer Army Afrika had made a masterful withdrawal from Egypt and now held the fortified zone at Mareth, with its left flank on the Gulf of Gabes and its right resting on the almost impassable salt marshes of the Chott Djerid. Rommel's attack against the US II Corps at Kasserine (14-22 February) and von Arnim's assault on the First Army's positions in northern Tunisia gained some time, but at the beginning of March Rommel was repulsed before Mareth (he was then to leave Africa due to illness) and the Germans lost the subsequent Battle of Mareth (20-26 March).
Axis forces continued to fight tenaciously, and the paras especially so. There were savage actions at Medjez-el-Bab (where there is a cemetery containing the graves of many fallen Fallschirmjäger) and Tebourba, but it was now impossible to halt the Allied tide. Reinforcements were still being flown into Tunisia, among them the Barenthin Parachute Regiment. This unit was an ad hoc formation made up of three battalions and supporting elements drawn from various units. As its commander was Colonel Walter Barenthin, a senior paratrooper engineer, it seems likely that a high proportion of his men were also engineers. Once in Tunisia it was allocated to the Manteuffel Division.
The final battle for Tunisia took place in May 1943, when Allied forces pierced the Axis perimeter: II Corps north and south of Lake Bizerta and the First Army east from Medjez-el-Bab.Von Arnim had committed all his reserves and the Luftwaffe was in the pro-

cess of withdrawing to Sicily, and was therefore unable to halt the Allied advance. Allied units entered Tunis on 7 May, and French and British forces surrounded the Italian First Army. Axis units began surrendering in droves, and by the end of the campaign (13 May) 275,000 prisoners had been taken. Most of what was left of the Ramcke Brigade, Barenthin Regiment and 11th Pioneer Battalion entered captivity. Ramcke himself, together with Witzig, Koch and other senior Fallschirmjäger commanders, were airlifted out of Tunisia before the surrender. In the great scheme of things the loss of a few hundred Fallschirmjäger was insignificant, for the Wehrmacht had lost an entire army group in North Africa - Germany's next great military disaster after Stalingrad. On Hitler's southern flank the fighting would now move to Sicily and Italy.

The West 1944 - 45

In the face of massive Allied firepower and aerial superiority, the parachute divisions in the West fought valiantly to try to contain the Normandy bridgehead, and then hold the borders of the Third Reich itself. But, along with other German divisions, the Fallschirmjäger were exhausted by relentless combat and a deluge of enemy manpower and resources.

On 3 November 1943, Hitler issued his Directive No 51 for the defence of occupied France. It began: "For the last two and one-half years the bitter and costly struggle against Bolshevism has made the utmost demands upon the bulk of our military resources and energies. This commitment was in keeping with the seriousness of the danger, and the overall situation. The situation has since changed. The threat from the East remains, but an even greater danger looms in the West: the Anglo-American landing! In the East, the

vastness of the space will, as a last resort, permit a loss of territory even on a major scale, without suffering a mortal blow to Germany's chance for survival. Not so in the West! If the enemy here succeeds in penetrating our defences on a wide front, consequences of staggering proportions will follow within a short time." The directive went on to detail the proposed buildup of forces in the West to meet the invasion. Though fanciful in parts, it contained a statement that was to come all too true for many German formations: "other available personnel are to be organised into battalions of replacements and equipped with the available weapons, so that the anticipated heavy losses can quickly be replaced."

The German order of battle

Despite the Führer's orders, the German Army in the West on the eve of Operation "Overlord", the Allied invasion of Normandy, was considerably weaker than planned in terms of equipment, quality and numbers. In June 1944 the commander of the Western Theatre, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, had 58 combat divisions divided between four armies. These armies were the First (commanded by General Joachim Lemelsen) holding the Atlantic coast of France, the Seventh (commanded by General Friedrich Dollmann) occupying Brittany and most of Normandy, the Fifteenth (commanded by General Hans von Salmuth) between Le Havre and Flushing, and the Nineteenth (commanded by General Georg von Sodenstern) deployed along the French Mediterranean coast. The Fifteenth and Seventh Armies were grouped under Army Group B, commanded by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. The First and Nineteenth Armies were grouped under Army Group G, commanded by Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz.

Because of units being stripped of troops and hardware for service on the Eastern Front, plus the policy of allocating the best weapons and equipment to the same theatre first, many German infantry, panzer and panzergrenadier divisions in the West immediately prior to the D-Day landings were understrength and equipped with second-rate captured tanks. This meant that the Fallschirmjäger divisions in the West were among Rundstedt's best units when the Allies landed. In fact, the Luftwaffe had been carrying out a restructuring of its parachute divisions since November 1943 (administratively under the Luftwaffe, in the field by this stage of the war parachute units were always tactically controlled by the army) as a result of the severe losses suffered in Italy and on the Eastern Front. The result was the formation of I Parachute Corps in Italy and II Parachute Corps, which on 26 April 1944 was transferred to Brittany to reinforce local defence forces in the area. In May the corps was made up of the following units: the 3rd Parachute Division (headquarters at Huelgoal, Brittany), 5th Parachute Division (headquarters at Rennes, Brittany), and 2nd Parachute Division (this much-weakened unit was at Köln-Wahn in Germany undergoing rest and refitting). In addition, the 6th Parachute Regiment under Major Freiherr von der Heydte was in Normandy in the Lessay-Mont Castre-Carentan area. Briefly attached to the 2nd Parachute Division, this unit was the only Fallschirmjäger formation in Normandy in May 1944.

The formation of the two parachute corps was only one part of a grand scheme devised by Göring for the formation of two parachute armies with a total strength of 100,000 men. The plan was approved by Hitler. Despite the fact that the days of large airborne operations were over, the various parachute units could still be classed as élites. Composed entirely of young volunteers from the draft (the average age of enlisted men in the 6th Parachute Regiment, for example, was 17 and a half), they were well armed and highly

motivated. By May 1944, for example, the strength of the 3rd Parachute Division stood at 17,420 men, having been only formed in Reims in October 1943. Another factor that made the para units so potent, especially in defence, was that they usually had a higher percentage of support weapons than infantry divisions. The rifle companies of the 6th Parachute Regiment, for example, had twice as many light machine guns as infantry rifle division companies.

II Parachute Corps, commanded by General Eugen Meindl, was part of the Seventh Army, and in April Hitler had begun to show an interest in Normandy as a potential invasion site. In response to this, the Seventh Army had moved the 6th Parachute Regiment to the Lessay-Periers area, where it was subordinated to the 91st Division. Its immediate mission was defence against airborne landings.

On 6 June 1944, the Western Allies launched the greatest amphibious operation in history. The statistics for the invasion force were staggering: 50,000 men for the initial assault; over two million men to be shipped to France in all, comprising a total of 39 divisions; 139 major warships used in the assault, with a further 221 smaller combat vessels; over 1000 minesweepers and auxiliary vessels; 4000 landing craft; 805 merchant ships; 59 blockships; 300 miscellaneous small craft; and 11,000 aircraft, including fighters, bombers, transports and gliders. In addition, the invasion force had the support of over 100,000 members of the French Resistance.

D-Day, the Allied invasion of Normandy, codenamed Operation "Overlord", began with the assault of three airborne divisions - the US 82nd and 101st on the right flank of the American forces, and the British 6th Airborne on the left flank of the British - while seaborne forces landed on five beaches. The main components of the invasion force, grouped under the umbrella of General Bernard Montgomery's Twenty-First Army Group, were the British Second Army under General Miles Dempsey and the US First Army under General Omar Bradley. Utah Beach was the target of the US 4th Infantry Division (part of the US VII Corps); Omaha Beach was the target of the US 1st Infantry Division (part of the US V Corps); Gold Beach was the landing site of the British 50th Infantry Division (part of the British XXX Corps); Juno was the target for the Canadian 3rd Infantry Division (part of the British I Corps); and the British 3rd Infantry Division was tasked with seizing Sword Beach (also part of the British I Corps).

The initial parachute and seaborne landings had mixed results: on Utah resistance was light and the troops were off the beach by 12:00 hours; on Omaha the lack of specialised armour meant the Germans could pin down the troops on the beach, with great slaughter; on Gold and Juno the specialised armour of the British and Canadians allowed the troops to get off the beaches quickly, and by the afternoon they were probing inland towards Bayeux and Caen; and on Sword the troops were able to link up with airborne units farther inland. The general Allied strategy was to capture Cherbourg for use as a port, prior to advancing south into Brittany and east across the River Seine. By the end of the day 155,000 Allied troops had been landed, backed up by massive aerial superiority and naval gunfire support.

The initial German response

The Germans were in a dilemma with regard to the landings, as they were unsure whether they were secondary to the main effort in the Pas de Calais. Hitler for one believed so, and he refused to release the mobile reserves from Panzer Group West until late in the af-