

Hidden Stories from Military History

by Christer Bergström



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The rebellious Luftwaffe Ace: Günther von Maltzahn – "defeatist" and "hero" at the same time!

By Christer Bergström

The question has been asked many times: Were the men in the Third Reich's armed forces, especially the Air Force, committed Nazis? Hermann Göring, the man who created and shaped the Luftwaffe, and at the same time the role model for many of its airmen – especially the fighter pilots – was one of the worst Nazis, a Jew-hater of the first order and one of the worst Nazi war criminals. But what about his subordinates?



Günther Freiherr von Maltzahn, known to his friends as "Henri", was credited with 68 victories and awarded the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves.

No doubt many Germans believed in the Nazi vision, not least in the Luftwaffe, the most politicized branch of the armed forces. But British intercepts of conversations between downed and captured Luftwaffe pilots show that only 30% can be considered "ideo-

logical" or "ideologically convinced". Günther von Maltzahn was definitely not one of them.

Günther Freiherr von Maltzahn was one of the most legendary German fighter pilots of World War II. He flew more than 500 combat missions, recorded 68 confirmed air victories and was awarded the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves. But what he is best known for is his personality and his proven leadership skills.

Hermann Neuhoff, who flew with the III. Gruppe* in fighter wing JG 53 between 1939 and 1942 (when he was accidentally shot down by a comrade and ended up in British captivity in Malta), said he felt lucky to have "the two best unit commanders in the Luftwaffe": Werner Mölders* and von Maltzahn.¹ Another of the men who served under von Maltzahn, Julius Meimberg, called von Maltzahn "the most exemplary commander in my life".² In his memoirs, published a few years before his death in 2012, Meimberg wrote of von Maltzahn: "My first impression of him was that he was a man of incomparable strength of character. He radiated energy and integrity; he was an exemplary leader. He had started his military career in the 1930s in a cavalry regiment, and there was something of the noble cavalryman in his personality."³

The prominent German aviation historian Jochen Prien, who has met more German aviation veterans than perhaps any other author, summarizes the impression of von Maltzahn conveyed by the veterans he met: "To all the men of JG 53, Günther von Maltzahn was something like the 'father of the unit'. Undoubtedly, he was a great exception among the unit commanders of the German fighter avia-

tion – completely unaffected by all temptations and enticements, he knew how to lead his wing in the tradition of the best Prussian devotion to duty, while his strong personality created an unusual sense of community in the wing. He set high standards, but never asked anything of his men that he did not carry out himself. Günther von Maltzahn was always responsive to his men, from the smallest ‘propeller cleaner’ to the group commander.”⁴

At the same time, he has been accused of being a “defeatist”. He certainly was a complex and very interesting personality, and in this article, we will take a closer look at this fascinating man and unit commander. Was he perhaps Jewish? So they say; we will find out the answer to that question too.

The Rebellious Nobleman

Günther Freiherr von Maltzahn was born on October 20, 1910, at the Wodarg manor near Werder in Western Pomerania. He belonged to a so-called “*Uradel*” family, which dated its family back to the Middle Ages – in von Maltzahn’s case to 1194.

The “Freiherr” in his name denoted a title rank similar to Baron. It was also found in the name of perhaps the most famous “Freiherr” of all – Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen – the Red Baron. He had eleven siblings, six sisters, and six brothers. The famous World War II Panzer Colonel Berndt-Joachim von Maltzahn was their uncle.

Günther’s father, Gerhard Adolf von Maltzahn, was in his own way the archetypal feudal lord who “looks after” the community, but he raised his children in a slightly different spirit. Christine Froechtenigt Harper, who authored a paper on Günther von Maltzahn, writes:

“Deeply rooted in their Pomeranian community, they spoke the local low German dialect, attended the village school, and learned the value of work by helping to bring in the harvest and tending their own garden. Although there were class differences between the children in the village and those in the big estate, the Maltzahn siblings learned that their privileged position meant a responsibility to all villagers, whether they were employed on the farm or not. *Herr* Maltzahn may not have been a leftist, but he did have some socially progressive attitudes, such as ensuring that all his children could support themselves; he supported a daughter’s interest in mathematics, which was unusual for women at the time, as well as a son’s desire to become an engineer, a profession not considered by some family members to be appropriate for someone of their social class.”⁵

Gerhard Adolf von Maltzahn not only instilled this ethos in his children but was also clear about his personal dislike of Nazism. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, he was prosecuted for refusing to fly the new swastika flag on the estate’s flagpole.⁶

This less hierarchical attitude taught to him by his father was reinforced in the young Günther when his father sent him to the Anklam Gymnasium (roughly equivalent to the U.S. high school or the British senior secondary school), which was unusually progressive at the time. For example, in 1927 the school was one of the first Gymnasium to introduce mixed-gender classes.⁷

German aviation pioneer Otto Lilienthal, with his “heavier than air” theories and glider experiments in the late 19th Century, inspired not only the Wright brothers, but also the von Maltzahn brothers. Lilienthal was also a former student of the Anklam Gymnasium; he had also tested his glider theories on Günther’s grandparents’ property. Unsurprisingly, several of the von Maltzahn brothers chose to literally test their own wings. In 1930, Günther enrolled in the then secret military section of the commercial flight school in Bavaria.

In 1931, he joined the Reichswehr and was placed in the 6th Prussian Cavalry Regiment. At the officers’ school in Dresden the following year, he met Werner Mölders*, with whom he shared a room. Of the 143 men in von Maltzahn’s class at the Dresden officer’s school, 84 joined the Luftwaffe. By the end of the war in 1945, almost half had been killed in action, one had fallen victim to the “Aryan Law” and been discharged (and later died in a bombing raid), and one had been arrested and executed as a spy.⁸

Around this time, when Günther was only 20 years old, he had a daughter, Dagmar, with 18-year-old Adelheid Böcking. Günther and Adelheid did not marry until their daughter was seven years old, which was unusual at the time. Dagmar would eventually have three siblings, the youngest of whom, Falk, has provided interviews and written material for this article.

In June 1933 Günther von Maltzahn graduated as an ensign. Two years later he signed up for flight training in the newly founded Luftwaffe, where he was selected to become a fighter pilot. In April 1936 he was placed in Fighter Group I./JG 234 as an adjutant, but in July 1937 he was transferred to the newly formed JG 334 (later JG 53) as *Staffelkapitän* (commander) of its 6th *Staffel**. His comrade Werner Mölders simultaneously became *Staffelkapitän* of the group’s 1st *Staffel*.

Unlike Mölders, von Maltzahn chose not to enlist in the Condor Legion* in Spain, but remained with



Men of the ground crew in front of von Maltzahn's Me 109 in France in 1940.

his unit, and in August 1939 was appointed commander of the II. Gruppe of JG 53. By then, Mölders had returned from Spain and taught von Maltzahn much that he later used in combat.

The Ace of Spades

At the outbreak of war, JG 53 was on the Western Front, which was characterized by relative calm for several months. Around the time the unit scored its first air victories on September 9, 1939, the unit emblem that gave JG 53 its famous name, the Ace of Spades (Pik As), was introduced.

On September 30, the calm was suddenly – and temporarily – broken, at least in the air, when JG 53 took off following a report that a formation of enemy aircraft was approaching the German border. En route, von Maltzahn spotted a Potez 637 reconnaissance aircraft and attacked at the head of his four-plane Schwarm.* This aircraft came from the French reconnaissance group GR II/52* and crashed after hits from the four machine guns of von Maltzahn's Me 109 E-1 near Saarbrücken. The observer and crew chief, Captain Dudezert, escaped unharmed by parachuting, but the gunner, Sergeant Rituit, was killed and the pilot, Ensign Mercy, was severely wounded. This was Günther von Maltzahn's first aerial victory, and he returned to base satisfied. A little later the other pilots returned. They had encountered six single-engine British Fairey Battle bombers and shot down five. On October 7, 1939, von Maltzahn was awarded the Iron Cross Second Class for his first air victory.

After a rather uneventful winter, on March 31, 1940, von Maltzahn's II./JG 53* was over the Saar when it clashed with a large formation of French Morane 406 fighters from Fighter Squadron GC III/7*, shooting down four and damaging three more with no casualties. As von Maltzahn was responsible for the second French fighter shot down in this combat, it probably was the one piloted by Adjutant René Chavet, which crashed at Grostenquin, north of Morhange on the French side of the border. The pilot was found dead in the wreckage of the aircraft. This was von Maltzahn's 40th combat mission but only his second air combat.⁹

On May 4, 1940, von Maltzahn had to emergency land his Me 109 E-1 east of Glauburg, northeast of Frankfurt. However, he was not a Baron for nothing; the young von Maltzahn went straight to nearby Düdelsheim, where he reported to the castle of Count Karl-Friedrich Graf zu Ysenburg. The count welcomed him warmly and invited him to dinner. Von Maltzahn spent a princely night at the castle before returning to the Mannheim-Sandhofen airbase the next morning.¹⁰ There he had his old 109 E-1, equipped only with machine guns, replaced by a 109 E-3 with two automatic cannons and two machine guns.

Six days later, the major German offensive on the Western Front began. II./JG 53 was transferred to the border area and deployed in the battle. On the first day of the offensive, von Maltzahn flew three combat missions and claimed the shooting down of a French Morane 406.¹¹ Although this air victory was not confirmed, he was awarded the Iron Cross First Class on the same day.

The unit with which von Maltzahn clashed on May 10, 1940, was the 1st squadron ("SPA3") of the famous French fighter group Groupe de Chasse I/2 "Les Cigognes". Its pilots had painted on their aircraft a stork ("cigogne") similar to the one that ace pilot Georges Guynemer decorated his plane with during the First World War. Lieutenant Jacques de-la-Bretonniere and Sous-Lieutenant Guy Husson both had their Morane 406s damaged in that air battle. This was von Maltzahn's 52nd combat mission and third air combat.¹²

Film clip:

Morane-Saulnier M.S. 406 and Curtiss H-75.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4wfObhn5Cw)

[v=v4wfObhn5Cw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4wfObhn5Cw)

On May 14, a three-engine Junkers 52 swept down over JG 53's airfield and landed. Out stepped a heavily armed escort of SS soldiers followed by Adolf Hitler, who had decided to make a brief inspection of the base.¹³ Was this bad luck? In any case, the next day von Maltzahn crashed his Me 109 E-3 when the landing gear gave way during landing. Five days later, von Maltzahn's air combat number four went worse for him: He was shot down during a dogfight with Curtiss H-75 fighters from the French fighter group GC I/4 and barely managed to belly land his bullet-ridden Me 109 E-4 in German-controlled territory. Von Maltzahn seems to have been protected by angels – he escaped all three incidents completely unscathed.

On June 9, during von Maltzahn's 92nd combat mission, he encountered enemy aircraft for the fifth time. Again, he was up against the aces of GC I/2 "Les Cigognes".

Von Maltzahn saw the Me 109 flown by his friend, the group's technical officer, Lieutenant Otto Böhner, burst into flames. Fortunately, Böhner was able to bail out, but it was over French territory and he was captured. The French returned to their base in full force, where pilots Laurent and Patureau-Mirand reported the shooting down of one Me 109 each. The latter had also shot down a Henschel 126 reconnaissance aircraft.

It is possible that von Maltzahn's "near-death" experiences in air combat over France caused him not to join in the general euphoria following the victory over France in June 1940. Instead of joining in the general jubilation, he provoked raised eyebrows among his fellow officers by saying that the "final victory" in the war was far from certain – he pointed out that Britain remained, and he was not at all confident that Germany would succeed in bringing it to

its knees. "Without an invasion we will not be able to defeat Great Britain with its vast territories and resources," he said.¹⁴

This was at a time when most people expected Britain to be prepared to make a separate peace with Germany. For the Nazis, it meant that they could start putting some new elements of their racial policy into practice.

In accordance with a direct order from Hitler, a directive had been issued on 8 April 1940 that "half-Jews" (a Nazi term used to describe people who had one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent) and soldiers married to Jewish women and "half-Jewish women" were not allowed to serve in the armed forces. But the very next day saw the invasion of Norway and Denmark, followed the next month by the major offensive in the west. As it was not possible to carry out such extensive measures in the middle of major military operations, they were effectively postponed until after France's surrender. But then the Nazis struck.

Göring's Wrath

In the summer of 1940, the men of JG 53 were shocked when, suddenly and without warning, an order came from none other than Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring that the ace of spades emblem on the engine plates of the Me 109s of JG 53 should be painted over with a 25-centimeter-wide red band around the nose of the aircraft.

The reason was that the unit commander, Major Hans-Jürgen Erdmann von Cramon-Taubadel, refused to divorce his Jewish wife Viola, née von Kaufmann-Asser.¹⁵ "We were outraged," said Hermann Neuhoff, who had achieved eight air victories during the Battle of France. "The explanation we were given was that the English knew of the existence of our Ace of Spades wing and that we should remove our aces of spades so as not to facilitate their intelligence activities. But none of us believed it. We knew that it was a thorn in the side of Göring and the other Nazi bosses that our commander had married a so-called 'not race-pure' woman. But he refused to divorce her, and all his subordinates stood up for our Commodore. So we had to replace our ace of spades with a 'red ring of shame'."¹⁶

In response to this, von Maltzahn's colleague, Captain Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, the commander of III./JG 53, also had the swastika painted over on the stabilizers of all the aircraft in his group. We do not know what von Maltzahn himself thought of the matter, but it is not hard to guess. However, he soon had other things on his mind.

At 1645 hours on August 8, 1940, von Maltzahn, at the head of a formation of Me 109s, took off from the German-occupied Channel Island of Guernsey. Out over the Channel, 15-20 kilometers south of Swanage, they spotted three Spitfires at 4,500 meters altitude. Von Maltzahn led the '109s to attack and opened fire against the Spitfire flying on the far right.

Von Maltzahn knew what he was doing. He aimed at this Spitfire obliquely from behind from the left, making it impossible for the pilot to move to the left (where he would otherwise collide with the other two aircraft), and instead forcing the British pilot to turn to the right – placing him right in front of the 109's automatic cannon.

The British pilot, 22-year-old Sergeant Dennis N. Robinson of RAF No. 152 Squadron, was lucky enough to survive and was able to describe how it happened:

"We were flying in very tight formation, with no more than a foot from the leader's wingtips. Therefore, Beaumont and I were completely fixated on the leader's airplane. That's how we flew at the beginning of the battle – until we learned better. Unfortunately, we were spotted by a group of Me 109s attacking from behind.

The first thing I felt was the bullets hitting my airplane and a long line of tracers streaming in front of my Spitfire. Instinctively, I pushed the control stick forward as far as it would go. For a brief second, my Spitfire stood on its nose and I looked straight down at Mother Earth, thousands of feet below. Thankfully, my Sutton harness was strong and tight. I could feel the straps cutting into my flesh as I went into a vertical dive at a speed that increased alarmingly fast. I felt a rising fear. Sweat was pouring out, my mouth was getting dry, and I felt like I was close to panic.

All this happened in a matter of seconds, but the speedometer needle was already hitting bottom. I picked up the plane and started looking for the enemy. That's what I did, turning and climbing at the same time. As I gave full throttle, using the emergency speed to speed up the climb, I noticed white smoke pouring out of the nose of the airplane. God, no! It's on fire!

Suddenly the engine stopped. Apparently, a hit in the radiator had drained it of all the glycol, and not even the trusty Merlin engine could do it at full power. That's what explained the white smoke. I felt an indescribable sense of relief. The fuel tanks with high-octane gasoline are located very close to the pilot in a Spitfire. Being burned to death was one of our greatest fears."¹⁷



The Spitfire of No. 152 Squadron's Sergeant Dennis N. Robinson after it had been shot down by von Maltzahn on August 8, 1940.

But von Maltzahn had broken off his attack, probably saving Robinson's life. He was able to glide his damaged machine over the coast, where he belly-landed and the aircraft stood on its nose, being totally destroyed. The pilot survived and lived a long life before passing away on July 28, 2015, four weeks after his 97th birthday. His Spitfire, R6811 "UM:N", was von Maltzahn's third air victory overall and the group's first in the Battle of Britain.

Film clip:

Denis Robinson describes how he was shot down by Günther von Maltzahn and his other experiences during the Battle of Britain:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1083&v=2ZGZ_-sQVXQ

However, the air fighting over the English Channel were fiercer than anything the German airmen had experienced before. On August 11, von Maltzahn wrote: "During the return flight Lieutenant Mosiccus is attacked by a lone Hurricane which disappears in a dive." His notes for the next day read: "Air combat with an innumerable number of enemy fighters."¹⁸

On August 13 – the so-called "Eagle Day" when RAF Fighter Command was supposed to be destroyed – everything goes wrong and II./JG 53 loses four Me 109s. Von Maltzahn wrote, "Escort for II./Stukageschwader 1.* End of cloud cover over England. The Stukas turn back. Air combat with Spitfires and Hurricanes."

Mounting Difficulties

On August 16, von Maltzahn was one of the air force officers from Luftflotte 3* called to Göring's hunting lodge Karinhall to inquire about the reason for the high losses over the English Channel. This saved him from the disaster of August 18. When he landed at Guernsey airbase at 1515 hours that day, the formations had already taken off.

RAF Fighter Command's Nos. 10 and 11 Groups deployed five squadrons against the Stuka formations and their fighter escort. Although the eighty-five Ju 87s of StG 77 have been dispatched – virtually the entire force of Bf 109s at Jafü 3's* disposal, more than two hundred Bf 109s from JG 2, JG 27, and JG 53 – and thus are many times stronger than the relatively small force of RAF fighters, the British manage to tear the Stuka formations apart. Twelve Hurricanes from No. 43 Squadron are the first to arrive, pouncing on the Stukas just as they come out of their dive after dropping their bombs. From their position 5,000 meters above, the Me 109 pilots witness the sudden flare-up of one Ju 87 after another far below. Then, as they dive down in horror to help the Stukas, they find themselves under attack.*

No. 234 Squadron's Spitfire pilots hurl themselves at the mass of Bf 109s with wild battle cries, creating a veritable frenzy among their formations. Flying Officer Paterson Clarence Hughes knocks down two of the German fighters. So does Sergeant Harker, and other '109s are brought down by Pilot Officers Robert Doe and Mortimer-Rose. Most of the Messerschmitt pilots have to fight hard to defend themselves, and meanwhile Nos. 152, 601 and 602 squadrons also show up to complete the massacre on the Stukas.

In the space of a few minutes, the British fighter pilots shoot down sixteen Stukas. In such an extensive air battle, it is inevitable that the fighter pilots exaggerate their results. No. 43 Squadron is credited with eight Ju 87s shot down, No. 152 Squadron contributes nine, and Nos. 601 and 602 squadrons, six each. Sergeant James Hallows of 43 Squadron claims three Ju 87s – thus repeating his feat of August 16, and bringing his tally to 16 air victories. In No. 601 Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Carl Davis and Flying Officer Tom Grier are credited with two kills each in the Stuka massacre. In addition, Davis bags one of the Me 109s that had managed to escape No. 234 Squadron.

In addition to the sixteen Ju 87s that remained in England, two crash due to severe battle damage on their return to France. Among the missing crew members is Hauptmann Herbert Meisel, the commander

of I./StG 77. It is a disaster for Stukageschwader 77, which is immediately taken out of action. The scattered remnants of the German escort fighter units return to base at irregular intervals, in disarray and with completely shattered pilots. The commanders of the escort fighter are at a loss to explain what had happened. They themselves have lost eight Me 109s – in combat with an enemy against whom they not only had the advantage of altitude, but also a fourfold numerical superiority! It is a defeat of the first order. The price of this fantastic success is limited to three destroyed and eight damaged aircraft for the participating RAF units.¹⁹

But, von Maltzahn managed to maintain the fighting spirits in his group, despite bitter losses. When he was appointed von Cramon's successor as Geschwaderkommodore (wing commander) at the end of September 1940, II./JG 53 had achieved 44 air victories over the English Channel. Even though eleven pilots – one third of the entire force – had been killed or written off as missing, this is a better ratio of victories to losses than that of most German fighter units at the same time.

On October 12, von Maltzahn scored his own eleventh air victory on his 156th combat mission. The Hurricane he shot down on that occasion was piloted by Pilot Officer Cardale "Carl" Capon of No. 257 Squadron. Normally, Capon flew as the wingman of the ace Robert Stanford Tuck; it is possible that if he had done so on this day, von Maltzahn would not have been successful. On this particular day Tuck was absent visiting 92 Squadron, where he added another Me 109 to his tally. Meanwhile, Capon is shot down and bails out from his aircraft, suffering only minor injuries. Five weeks later, on November 15, 1940, JG 53 achieved its 500th air victory.

"One of those defeatists"

But this could not hide the fact that the RAF had inflicted a stinging defeat on the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain. For example, Werner Mölders called in sick with "flu", despite being able to participate in game hunting, and even Hermann Göring called in sick on the grounds that "I couldn't take it anymore". Adolf Galland* said: "We quarreled with the leadership, we quarreled with the bombers, and in the end, we quarreled with each other."²⁰

The German fighter wing commanders – such as Galland, Günther Lützow, Hannes Trautloft, Werner Mölders, and Günther von Maltzahn – met regularly to discuss their concerns. During one of these meetings, von Maltzahn shocked them by saying that after



Von Maltzahn (second from the right) having a quick outdoor meal with Adolf Galland (third from the right) and other Luftwaffe pilots at the English Channel in the fall of 1940.

the failure at the English Channel, he considered it impossible for Germany to win the war, and that the only thing left was to seek a compromise peace with the British. Some of the others reacted strongly to this and even accused him of becoming “one of those defeatists” – strong words indeed!²¹

But defeatism is probably the wrong word to describe von Maltzahn's feelings. He continued to strive, with great success, to maintain high morale and good spirit among his subordinates. Now promoted to Major, on November 20, 1940, he ordered the red ribbon to be painted over and the Ace of Spades emblem to be put back on all aircraft in the wing. This helped to raise both the morale of the unit and von Maltzahn's reputation among his men. On December 30, 1940, he was awarded the Knight's Cross, not primarily for his 12 air victories, but in recognition of his good leadership of the unit.

In February-March 1941, von Maltzahn replaced his old Me 109 E with a '109 of the new version, Me 109 F, “Friedrich”, which was faster and more maneuverable, although less heavily armed. It is with this that he shot down his last aircraft over England on May 9, 1941. At 1755 hours that day, he took off in his yellow-nosed Me 109 F-2, Werknummer 6683*, and headed out over the Channel with his staff formation.

Twenty minutes later, six Spitfires climb into to the sky from Biggin Hill for a patrol mission. One of them is Spitfire Mk IIa, serial number P7305. This

had been manufactured as a Mark I in July 1940 and participated in the entire Battle of Britain. On August 14, 1940, the machine had been damaged in a landing after combat with German bombers. The same thing happened on September 17, 1940. Now it is piloted by Sergeant Robert Mercer of No. 609 Squadron.

Von Maltzahn's wingman, Franz Schiess, wrote in his diary:

“Combat with Spitfires over Dungeness. The Tommies always fly stupidly in the condensation layer, 5,000 meters and higher, and therefore we can spot them from a distance. We climb above them and attack from high altitude. A Spit hangs a little behind and below the others and we dive 500 meters to him. When the commander (von Maltzahn) is about 70 meters away, the Spit rolls twice and dives away vertically. We pursue him, but due to the high speed, my elevator is almost impossible to move. How I managed to get out of the dive I still don't understand. I level off at 4,000 meters. Where are the others? No one as far as the eye can see. Being alone over England is suicidal because of the extremely poor visibility to the rear; a pilot wouldn't know that he had been shot down until he was already in flames. Our entire formation has disintegrated during the combat. Oberleutnant* Pufahl returns alone and shortly afterwards the commander also lands. He has shot down a Spitfire.”

Robert Mercer's machine hit the beach near St. Margaret's Bay. The pilot was killed. Today parts of

this Spitfire are in the Kent Battle of Britain Museum. This would have been von Maltzahn's sixteenth air victory, but as the other Germans lost von Maltzahn in the battle and could not witness the Spitfire's impact, it was unconfirmed.

No. 609 Squadron would exact revenge on JG 53 on von Maltzahn's last combat mission over England (the 110th overall) on June 4, 1941, when Feldwebel* Heinrich Rühl was shot down and killed. Shortly afterwards, JG 53 was ordered to transfer to the east.

Against the Red Air Force

In the summer of 1941, von Maltzahn and the staff squadron of his wing briefly took part in the fighting on the Eastern Front. There he was hurled into a flurry of combat activity – 177 combat missions in less than six weeks²² – and achieved great success in air combat. Several times he shot down three Soviet planes in a single day, even four on June 25, 1941. Most of these were bombers without a fighter escort. What shocked von Maltzahn during the air war on the Eastern Front were the very young Soviet pilots – often no more than teenagers – who were sacrificed en masse in desperate attempts to halt the German advance.²³

But the operations also took their toll on JG 53. Von Maltzahn himself was shot down three times in the space of three weeks, but again escaped unscathed.

Defying the adverse weather on July 14, 1941, von Maltzahn and his wingman, Leutnant Franz Schiess, set out for a free hunting mission at 1050 hours and came across nine SBs, again from 224 SBAP, escorted



Sergeant Robert Mercer's Spitfire of No. 609 Squadron.

by three I-16s. Schiess blew one of the bombers out of the skies—identified as the one with Leytenant Ivan Pogodin as pilot—and von Maltzahn shot an I-16 off his wingman's tail, recorded as the Geschwaderkommodore's 33rd victory.²⁴

However, that it could be dangerous to underestimate the enemy, even when he flew with obsolete Polikarpovs, was displayed to Walter Oesau that same day, when his Bf 109 was badly shot up by an I-16 near Kiev. The German ace barely managed to return to base. Back at the airfield the flight surgeon removed small splinters from his face, some a few inches from his left eye. Oesau later confessed that during the return flight, the thought of risking a force-landing in enemy-held territory scared him so much that he almost passed out.

Von Maltzahn would have the same experience the next day, July 15. In the morning he and his Stabsschwarm had yet another clash with the same Soviet units as on the two previous days. Franz Schiess, his wingman, recorded this in his diary: "We encountered two I-15s and an SB-3. The Kommodore shot down an I-15 and the bomber in a few minutes. I grappled with the second fighter. He flew very skillfully, and I never got a chance to open up. Whenever I approached to about 100 meters, he turned into me. I went through this with the fellow several times, by which time I had already strayed east of the Dnepr, leaving me with little option but to break off."²⁵ One of



Von Maltzahn's new Messerschmitt 109 F, sporting 20 victory bars, just ahead of the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

von Maltzahn's pilots had his Bf 109 badly shot up during this combat and had to make a one-wheel landing back at the airfield.²⁶

Von Maltzahn was in the air again that afternoon and encountered pilots from 36 IAD PVO who promptly shot him down. Once again, however, the German commander managed to save himself through a skillfully conducted belly-landing in friendly territory and could walk away unharmed.

Apparently undeterred by his close encounter with death, von Maltzahn was the first fighter pilot in the air at 0640 hours the next morning, July 16, and when he landed on the last drops of fuel one hour and forty minutes later, he could report the shooting down of yet another SB. Again, it was a machine from 224 SBAP, with the crew of Leytenant Petr Yershov being killed. (Yershov was awarded the Order of the Red Banner.²⁷) Before the day was over, von Maltzahn had flown three combat missions, the last one being a low-level attack against a village held by the Red Army.²⁸

In early August 1941, when von Maltzahn's staff squadron had only two operational aircraft left, the unit was ordered back to Germany for rearmament.



Von Maltzahn at his 31st birthday on October 20, 1941.



Franz Schiess, von Maltzahn's wingman.

Air Battle for Malta

In December 1941, JG 53's staff squadron was given a new theater of war, where it would remain for a long time: the Mediterranean. Von Maltzahn was ordered to move the unit to Sicily to take part in the new air offensive against Malta. From this island, the British had managed to cut off Axis shipping to Rommel's Africa Corps, and now it was time to strike back. With the exception of the III. Gruppe, which was sent to North Africa, the entire wing assembled in Sicily.

Despite heavy rain, the combat flights began without delay. The task was to escort dive-bombers and bombers against Malta. With 400 German and over 200 Italian aircraft against only 80 British Hurricanes on Malta, the Axis were quickly able to secure the convoys to North Africa again, allowing Rommel to return to the offensive – which would eventually take him all the way to el-Alamein in Egypt.

Film clip:

German air attacks on Malta

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp5IF9ijeZQ>



Von Maltzahn (right) is congratulated by Werner Mölders on his 31st birthday on October 20, 1941.

Already on December 19, 1941, von Maltzahn was able to score his 50th victory by shooting down a Hurricane piloted by an American volunteer, Pilot Officer Edward "Pete" Steele of RAF No. 126 Squadron, who was killed.

But it was not always the case that victory reports matched the enemy's actual losses. On the morning of December 26, von Maltzahn and his wingman attacked four Hurricanes from above, hitting one with such effect that his companion, Ensign Franz Schiess, later reported it as shot down. What actually happened is recounted by Canadian airman Pilot Officer Ian McKay, who watched the air combat from the ground: "Just as we reached the field of No. 242 Squadron, four Hurricanes scrambled. Flight Lieutenant [Nigel] Kemp listened to the pilots' radio traffic and heard Paddy Kee report that he was pursuing an '88. About ten minutes later we heard the sound of automatic cannon directly above us and saw two '109s coming down on the four Hurricanes. Sgt. [Donald] Neale's machine was hit by automatic cannon and machine gun fire and for a few seconds it looked as if he was doomed, but then he regained control of the airplane and made a belly landing. He managed to get out of the aircraft on his own, despite having shrapnel in both legs and one arm. The starboard side of the plane was literally full of holes. The cockpit was completely covered in blood and oil. All the hydraulics had been shot away. Sergeant Neale was a very lucky man – some of the cannon and machine gun hits were very close."²⁹

But the British air force on Malta was being worn down bit by bit. On January 25, 1942, von Maltzahn took off with his staff squadron and some pilots from the I. Gruppe to escort Junkers 88 bombers that were to attack two ships leaving Malta. He knew there would be a fight, as the British were reluctant to leave them without a fighter escort. Von Maltzahn soon spotted the enemy: seven Hurricanes at high altitude, and five more below. He led his formation in a wide turn that placed them between the sun and the British planes, and then dived to attack from behind. "We got in without the enemy seeing us, and I attacked the Hurricane on the extreme left. It was a direct hit. The Englishman dropped like a stone, and after a while



Von Maltzahn's Messerschmitt 109 F in December 1941, sporting 48 victory bars.

he caught fire explosively and crashed into the sea."³⁰ 22-year-old Pilot Officer John Russell, also from No. 126 Squadron, followed his plane to the bottom of the Mediterranean.

Von Maltzahn reassembled his formation and prepared the next attack. He spotted two slightly higher-flying Hurricanes swinging around. At first, he thought they were trying to get behind the Germans, but they leveled off and set off at full speed towards land. Von Maltzahn took up the chase, and with his Me 109 – of the new F-4 version – he quickly caught up. He said: "Again I took aim at the aircraft on the far left, and again I got a direct hit. The pilot jumped out. I saw him flash by just above my canopy. Meanwhile, two of my comrades had shot down two other Hurricanes, so there were three going down at the same time." These three Hurricane pilots survived by taking to their parachutes.

Now von Maltzahn and his comrades went after the five Hurricanes in the lower flying group. For the third time he selected the leftmost aircraft but soon found himself in a swirling dogfight and failed to score any decisive hits. However, other Messerschmitt pilots managed to shoot down three Hurricanes and damage two more. With one of these, von Maltzahn's wingman Franz Schiess achieved his 15th air victory. Finally, von Maltzahn gave the order to return to base – where the Germans reported eight kills for no own losses. After this battle, only about 20 Hurricanes remained on Malta. On March 23, 1942, von Maltzahn was awarded the Ehrenpokal der Luftwaffe (Air Force Cup of Honor), a 20 cm high silver trophy introduced by Göring.

But the constant flying of single-engine planes over the sea took its toll on the nerves of the young aviators. Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, the head of the German Luftflotte 2, complained of the "Malta

disease” among fighter pilots who called in sick a bit too often. Von Maltzahn came to the defense of his pilots and clashed with Kesselring more than once.

Meanwhile, Malta received reinforcements in the form of Spitfires.

Nevertheless, von Maltzahn’s staff squadron did very well in the air combats over Malta. On April 1, von Maltzahn claimed his 60th victory against one of these Spitfires. Afterwards, he reported: “On the return flight with the staff formation after an operation over Malta, I suddenly saw two Spitfires on the opposite course, 500 meters lower. I dived and came in behind one of them, but in the meantime six more Spitfires appeared, so a wild dogfight broke out. The Spitfire pilots proved to be both very aggressive and skilled. Only after several attempts did I manage to get behind a Spitfire in a sharp right turn and open fire with great lead. One of my cannon shells tore a large hole in the Englishman’s right aileron, and soon afterwards about half the aileron was torn off. The Spitfire dived, still rolling, but I clung on behind him. The pilot never regained control of his airplane and tried to bail out, but the parachute got caught in the burning machine. The plane crashed five kilometers south of Comiso.”³¹

This time, however, it seems as though von Maltzahn made a misjudgment and confused the British aircraft that he had shot at with a German plane that crashed near Comiso. In fact, the “Spitfire” that he had hit was a Hurricane, and the pilot, Canadian Pilot Officer James Ian “Skip” McKay, managed to land his damaged plane at Luqa in Malta. McKay described this event – which actually took place on his 21st birthday:

“I had a good crack at one 87 and think it went in but couldn’t see ‘cause I had to break away when two 109s came down on me. My birthday nearly ended in disaster after breaking off the engagement with the 87. I then went to sea level and came back over the island. I was just about over Luqa when I felt and heard my aircraft being hit, which made me turn steeply to port. A 109 had come up behind me and taken a good squirt at me. There were two large cannon holes in my wing and several machine-gun bullets. I had to land without flaps ‘cause the starboard one was all shot away.”³²

McKay survived the war, during which he received seven campaign medals and scored 2 enemy aircraft destroyed, 1½ probables and 7 damaged, most of those over Malta. He passed away on May 22, 2015, at the age of 94.



Canadian Pilot Officer James Ian “Skip” McKay was attacked by von Maltzahn on his 21st birthday on April 1, 1942. His Hurricane became von Maltzahn’s 60th victory.

Film clip:

Von Maltzahn in Sicily.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdVHwLpDos>

By the end of April 1942, von Maltzahn and his pilots had claimed 23 British aircraft shot down, 14 of them by the wing commander himself, without any own combat losses. That was a better ratio than that on the Eastern Front in 1941, when the staff squadron claimed 70 air victories against 7 combat losses. In fact, the first pilot of the staff squadron to be shot down during the air battle over Malta was von Maltzahn himself!

After great success, the German air offensive against Malta officially ended on April 28, 1942. Air raids on the island did continue, but on a much smaller scale. The Axis powers made the mistake of counting out the badly damaged island and transferred most of the aircraft of the German II Air Corps to other theaters of war. Only about 60 bombers, 40 fighters, and 30 dive bombers were left in Sicily.



Comiso, Sicily, early 1942: Günther von Maltzahn and some of the officers of JG 53 play treasure. Seated from right to left: Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke, von Maltzahn and Herbert Kaminski. Standing from left: Ernst-Günther Heinze, von Maltzahn's second-in-command Franz Schiess and Karl Beyschlag.



Von Maltzahn in his Messerschmitt 109 F en route to Malta.



Von Maltzahn is interviewed by a war correspondent in Comiso, Sicily.

The Commander is shot down!

Meanwhile, the defenders received strong reinforcements. On May 9, two British aircraft carriers delivered a total of 64 Spitfire Mark Vs which, unlike the Hurricane, were equal to the German Me 109 F. These were deployed en masse the very next day against the German formations flying towards Malta. In the biggest air battle ever seen over Malta, the Germans lost twelve aircraft without being able to shoot down more than two of their opponents.

When what remained of the Luftwaffe in Sicily returned on May 11, the Spitfires were at it again. On that day, Junkers 88 bombers from bomber wings KG 51* and KG 77 were dispatched against the port of La Valetta, where aerial reconnaissance had established the presence of strong British naval forces.

JG 53 was flying escort, and von Maltzahn spotted three Spitfires heading for a group of three Junkers 88s. He dove on them with the entire staff squadron. He scored hits on a Spitfire piloted by Sergeant Virgil Brennan of No. 249 Squadron, but immediately afterward, von Maltzahn's '109 shivered under the hits from a Spitfire's cannons. Pilot Officer Peter Nash had spotted his comrade Brennan's predicament and had dived in at full speed with the sun at his back. Nash was a veteran with nine confirmed and another seven unconfirmed kills. Despite the fact that one of his two 20 mm automatic guns was malfunctioning, he managed to land some fatal hits on von Maltzahn's machine. Nash kept firing until he was only 50 meters away, and then quickly dived under the German.



Sergeant Virgil Brennan of No. 249 Squadron. His Spitfire was hit by von Maltzahn's fire in the air combat over Malta on May 9, 1942.

Von Maltzahn bailed out of his shattered Me 109 at 1,500 meters, pulled the parachute cord and plummeted into the Mediterranean Sea off the island of Gozo. The alarm was immediately raised in Sicily, and a three-engine Dornier 24 flying boat from Seenotstaffel 6 (Maritime Rescue Squadron 6) took off with a strong fighter escort from the Augusta Naval Air Station in Sicily, shortly afterwards picking up the freezing wing commander – who had once again been flirting with death. The war diary of the staff and signal company of JG 53 describes how this event was experienced on the airfield:



A Dornier Do 24 flying boat.

“Before take-off, the mechanics stood on the wings of the Me 109s and cranked the handles to start the engines. A final salute from the cabin and the aircraft rolled out for take-off. The pilots head for the designated rendezvous point with the bombers. There is radio silence. We will not betray our operation to the enemy by chattering on the airwaves. Commander Maltzahn has impressed this upon all groups and squadrons. At the wing headquarters there is a tense silence. The chief of staff follows the flight path of the unit. We are in direct radio contact with the Maritime Rescue Squadron in Syracuse, just in case. The first radio messages let us know that the units are over the target. A few exciting seconds follow as the bombs fall on the British ships. Almost all the bombs hit the naval units. This is a great success. Now we hear on the radio about the first contacts with the RAF, and soon everyone is shouting at each other on the radio. Then suddenly – a shocking radio call from the staff flight: The commander's airplane is on fire! The radio operators react with lightning speed and demand to know the exact position. Some contradictory and unclear radio calls make it difficult at first to determine the exact position, but soon we get a clear answer. A lightning-fast message is sent to the Maritime Rescue Squadron in Syracuse.

Immediately after landing, Lieutenant Schiess, followed by his dog, rushes to the command post. His face is marked by the fierce air battle, but in his Austrian way he explains what happened: the RAF fighters had come out of the sun and caught the commander by surprise. The terrible news that the commander has been shot down spreads like wildfire. Dismay and concern are everywhere.

Unteroffizier* Lodder, the commander's first mechanic, is particularly anxious. But then, providing tremendous relief, arrives the report from a maritime rescue plane: A rubber life raft has been sighted, we are landing nearby! General jubilation breaks out. The next day, a Fieseler Storch flies to Syracuse to pick up the commander. When he arrives at the airport, the joy knows no bounds. No sooner has the Storch taxied in and the side door opened than dozens of hands reach out and literally lift the beloved commander out of the cabin. His broad smile lets everyone know that he is fine.”³³

As a sidenote, it may be remarked that 20-year-old Peter Nash was one of the most successful RAF aces in Malta. He achieved a total of 11½ victories before he was killed in action on May 17, 1942 – shot down by either Unteroffizier Erich Paczia or Lieutenant Hans Märkstetter of II./JG 53.



Pilot Officer Peter Nash, the man who shot down von Maltzahn on May 9, 1942.

The air combat on May 11, 1942, proved to be the turning point in the air battle for Malta. In the following weeks, 76 more Spitfires arrived in Malta, while German II Air Corps grew weaker and weaker. Von Maltzahn's unit suffered terribly, losing 17 aircraft and 11 pilots in May and June 1942, after which only 15 Me 109s and 17 pilots remained.

The Greatest Threat

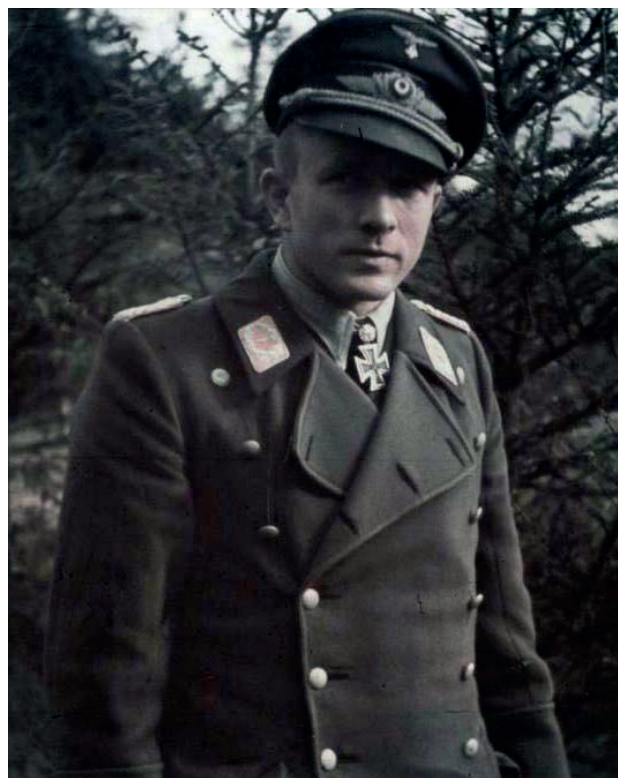
Von Maltzahn went home on extended leave, where he saw a doctor to examine some physical symptoms. It turned out that he had Hodgkin's lymphoma, which at the time was almost a certain death sentence. But the doctors did not tell him anything and blamed his symptoms on something else. Admitted to the Charité University Hospital in Berlin, he received the best treatment available – including a radioactive dose strong enough to cause damage to his internal organs – and after a few weeks he was discharged symptom-free. He would remain asymptomatic for the rest of the war. By sheer coincidence, one of his sisters, who worked in medical research in Berlin, happened to read the file of a cancer patient whose initials, date of birth, and occupation – fighter pilot – matched her brother's. But the shocked woman kept quiet about it.³⁴

When Günther von Maltzahn returned to his unit in the fall of 1942 – now with the rank of lieutenant colonel – it was clear that the Allies would be

victorious in the Mediterranean. The British fighter defenses in Malta had been further strengthened, with serious consequences for the morale of the German and Italian bomber crews.

On October 15, 1942, von Maltzahn experienced this first-hand. That day he received a telephone call from his old friend Heinz Wittmeyer, who had been transferred six months earlier from JG 53 to a staff position in II Air Corps. Wittmeyer asked if he could fly a combat mission with the "Ace of Spades" wing again. "Yes, absolutely!" von Maltzahn replied, "you will fly with me on the next mission." When they took off early the next day, tasked with escorting a bomber unit to Malta, they both got a glimpse of how much the high losses had taken a toll on the bomber fliers' fighting spirits. Wittmeyer said, "Instead of heading for Malta, the Italian bombers flew to the sea area south of the island, and there, undisturbed by enemy aircraft, they dropped their entire bomb load. We just gaped in amazement. Then enthusiastic congratulations on their successful attack came over the Italian radio, which caused many hearty laughs among us in the wing." (According to Wittmeyer, these were Italian bombers, but combat reports show that they were Junkers 88s from the German bomber wing KG 54).

The next day's raids against Malta cost the Luftwaffe bomber arm two of its few Oak Leaves holders, Major Heinrich Paepcke and Major Gerhard Kollwe.



Von Maltzahn at home in Germany in the fall of 1942.

The German-Italian army in North Africa was finally defeated at el-Alamein in November 1942 and driven back to Tunisia, which was quickly occupied by a new German-Italian army. Among several German air units redeployed to Tunisia was JG 53. Here the Axis powers were assaulted from two directions – from Montgomery’s Eighth Army coming from Egypt and Libya in the east, and from the British-American forces that had landed in Morocco and Algeria in the west. Now von Maltzahn and his airmen also made their first acquaintance with the American Flying Fortresses.

The battle became increasingly fierce against a growing Allied superiority both on the ground and in the air. On December 18, 1942, the Bizerta air base on the north coast of Tunisia – where JG 53 was based – was subjected to two bombing raids by B-17 Flying Fortresses from the U.S. 97th Bomb Group. Von Maltzahn managed to get airborne at the last moment and over the next twenty minutes he experienced what a difficult opponent a Flying Fortress could be, even after its defensive armament had been neutralized. In his first attack on one of the bombers, von Maltzahn scored several hits with his cannon on two of the bomber’s engines. The pilot turned these off, with the result that his aircraft lagged behind the others and their protective fire. The German ace swung around and made another successful attack on the bomber, which this time emitted an increasingly thick stream of smoke. But despite making one after another more successful attacks on the increasingly defenseless bomber, it took a full 15 minutes before the machine finally crashed and hit the ground. This was von Maltzahn’s 67th air victory.

Film clip:

American B-17 Flying Fortresses in Algeria

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgdwcWl2jdU&t=486s)

[v=AgdwcWl2jdU&t=486s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgdwcWl2jdU&t=486s)

Despite increasingly fierce fighting, von Maltzahn did everything he could to keep up the morale of his airmen, albeit through unconventional methods. Julius Meimberg was at that time commander of the 11th Squadron of JG 2 with the honorary name “Richthofen”. This squadron was one of several units hastily sent to Tunisia in November 1942. Since it was thus separated from the mother unit, Field Marshal Kesselring decided to incorporate it into von Maltzahn’s JG 53. This dismayed Meimberg and his pilots, who were proud of their “Richthofen” affiliation, so Meimberg turned to von Maltzahn with his concerns.

“No problem, Meimberg”, replied von Maltzahn, “from now on you fly in my wing, but as 11./JG 2 – U.D.T.!”

“U.D.T.?” Meimberg asked, “What does that mean?”

“*Unter der Theke* [under the blanket]”, von Maltzahn replied with a broad grin.³⁵

On December 23, 1942, von Maltzahn was awarded the German Cross in Gold. A few weeks later, at the end of January 1943, he was called to Berlin for a major conference of German fighter commanders. If any Berliners doubted that it was primarily fighter pilots who were awarded the highest war honors, the sight of the wing commanders on their way from their Fürstenhof and Excelsior hotels to the Reich Air Ministry made them think again. Hannes Trautloft* wrote in his diary: “As we walked through the town, people stopped and stared. They had never seen so many Knight’s Crosses at once!”³⁶

There was Walter Oesau from JG 2, Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke from JG 3, Josef Priller from JG 26, Dietrich Hrabak from JG 52, von Maltzahn from JG 53, and Joachim Müncheberg from JG 77. All of them carried the Knight’s Cross around their necks; von Maltzahn and Priller with Oak Leaves; Lützow, Oesau, Wilcke, and Müncheberg with Oak Leaves and Swords, and Galland in the lead with the Knight’s Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds. Von Maltzahn arrived from Africa in the company of his friend Joachim Müncheberg, the very popular commander of the neighboring wing JG 77.

Among other things, they were given a demonstration of the Me 262 jet aircraft, which deeply impressed everyone. They also witnessed the interruption of Göring’s speech by the British Mosquito planes on January 30, the anniversary of the Nazi seizure of power. Trautloft wrote in his diary:

“On the morning of January 30, we attend the meeting in the ‘Hall of Honor’ in the Reich Air Ministry. While the illustrious crowd stands waiting breathlessly for the Reich Marshal, the sirens are sounding. The guests of honor, the company of honor, the whole bunch rushes down to the basement. I must confess that in the midst of this deplorable scene I could sense the comedy of it all.”³⁷

“Like a rock in a stormy sea”

Back in Tunisia, von Maltzahn was ordered to send a command of fighters south to support Rommel’s counterattack at the Kasserine Pass. For him it was a matter of honor to lead this dangerous mission him-

self. He took his staff flight of three pilots and a force of ground personnel and moved to Kairouan, about a hundred kilometers south of Tunis. But he spared his wingman and friend Franz Schiess – who in recent months had turned into a most successful fighter ace – from doing so. He promoted Schiess to lieutenant and sent him to Comiso in Sicily to take over as commander of the wing's 8th squadron.

Schiess wrote in a letter home to his parents: "It is of course sad to leave the commander, but I am still in the wing, and being a squadron commander is as sweet as candy. It's like being a company commander, and you have a bunch of guys that you can put your own stamp on. I'm already very excited about this. There's not much going on in Comiso, so I'm sure I'll be able to laze around a bit there. It will do me good."³⁸

After some initial success, the counteroffensive at Kasserine in February 1943 ended in a setback. On March 2, 1943, thirty-eight B-17 Flying Fortresses attacked the port of Palermo in Sicily. Twenty Me 109 pilots from JG 53 were scrambled to repel the attack, but failed. Not a single bomber was shot down, while Oberfeldwebel* Herbert Rollwage, one of the aces of the II Gruppe, was wounded and crash-landed. As a result, the Italian passenger ship *Lampedusa*, loaded with soldiers, was sunk by the American bombs. This was repeated a few hours later, when JG 53 again failed to achieve any results against another formation of Flying Fortresses.



Von Maltzahn, the commander, among his men.

The war diary of the staff and signal company of JG 53 tells how von Maltzahn made efforts to overcome the problems: "The commander ordered all group commanders to appear with their pilots for a briefing in the headquarters. The commander stood among them like a rock in a stormy sea. Objectively, calmly, and in a disciplined manner, they went through the mistakes and errors made by the pilots. He drummed into the young pilots in particular the correct attack tactics and approach to air combat, based on his own years of experience."³⁹

But this did not help against the murderous pressure of the Allied aviation. On March 10, seventy-two Flying Fortresses were able to attack the German airfield at Tunis with impunity, destroying a large number of aircraft on the ground. On that day, von Maltzahn's JG 53 had exactly forty-seven operational Me 109s, out of a nominal inventory of three times that number.

On March 23, the German air force in Tunisia was dealt a heavy blow: Major Joachim Müncheberg, the commander of JG 77, was killed when he collided with an enemy aircraft during air combat. Von Maltzahn saw this as a bad omen. From his position so close to the front, he could see that the whole battle for Tunisia would end in defeat. Hitler had ordered resistance to the last man and the last bullet, but von Maltzahn would not sacrifice his men. So on March 26, 1943, he secretly sets up a command to prepare the evacuation of JG 53 to Sicily. The next day he dispatches the first elements of JG 53 from Tunisia to Sicily to prepare for the reception of the other units there.

The Battle of Tunisia comes to a depressing end for the Axis, and the leadership grows increasingly desperate. In early April 1943, Fighter General Adolf Galland flies to Tunisia to investigate the increasingly deplorable state of the German fighter units. No sooner has he arrived than a furious phone call comes in from the Navy: a formation of Flying Fortresses has attacked a convoy of Italian ships north of Tunisia, sinking one ship and damaging another so badly that it had to be beached. 146 men perished. In addition, the German anti-submarine vessel UJ 2202/*Jutland* was sunk by the bombs. Galland and Kesselring sharply accused the German fighter pilots of failing to repel this small attack by no more than 22 Flying Fortresses.

One of the German fighter pilots, Günther Rübell, said: "They were looking for scapegoats, but von Maltzahn, without hesitation, stood up for all of us and flew to the Fighter General's headquarters in Sicily on April 7. There he personally assumed

all responsibility for the failure but also reported on how it had actually happened. To lead is not only to give orders and instructions; to lead is first and foremost to take responsibility. This was Günther von Maltzahn's management philosophy. So did men like Mölders and Günther Lützow.*"

What had happened was this: the convoy had sailed from Naples late on April 5. It was detected by the Allies through "Ultra" – the radio interception system that decoded the German Enigma* codes – and an operation against the convoy was prepared. The first air strike against the convoy was carried out at 0925 hours on the morning of April 6. This was met by German fighters and failed. The next air strike was made with 18 bombers at 1110 hours, and this too was repulsed by the German fighter escort.

At 1717 hours, the convoy was off Cape Zebib when twenty-two B-17 Flying Fortresses suddenly appeared at an altitude of 3,000 meters, heading perpendicular to the ships. At that time only six Me 109s were above the convoy. These immediately pounced on the American planes, forcing most of them to evade and jettison their bombs into the sea. But three machines made it through and dropped their bombs. By sheer luck, a whole volley of bombs hit the large cargo steamer *Rovereto*, which exploded. At the same time, the freighter *San Diego* was also hit and caught fire. At 1935 hours, this vessel also exploded.⁴⁰

Galland and Kesselring were impressed by von Maltzahn's personal appearance and assumption of responsibility. They were convinced by his explanation that the failure was due to inadequate resources of the fighter units in Tunisia.

It is possible that von Maltzahn's action saved the fighter pilots from reprisals after the disaster on Palm Sunday, April 18, 1943. Two days earlier, sixty Flying Fortresses had plowed the JG 53 airfield at La Sebala with their bombs.⁴¹ So, when 65 Junkers 52 transports took off from the air base at Tunis on April 18, fifteen Me 109s were all that was available to escort them. They were attacked by 57 Allied fighters, which executed a terrible massacre: 37 transport planes were shot down and another nine were damaged.

From now on, Axis airfields in Tunisia were subjected to incessant bombing. Apparently exhausted



Von Maltzahn with Field Marshal Albert Kesselring (left).

by the high tempo of combat and the constant bombing, Captain Wolfgang Tonne, an ace with 122 air victories in the I. Gruppe, was killed in a landing accident in Tunis on April 20. At that time the Axis fighter command also collapsed as all communication lines were destroyed by the bombing.

Disaster over Sicily

On May 4, von Maltzahn ordered the wing to assemble on the Cap Bon Peninsula to prepare for the evacuation to Sicily. Over the next three days, all aircraft and personnel were flown over to the Italian island. Von Maltzahn personally flew the very last evacuation mission, which is described in the war diary of the Staff and Signal Company of JG 53: "On May 7, 1943, at 1900 hours, the eagerly awaited last four Me 109s, led by wing commander Freiherr von Maltzahn, landed at Cap Bon. He came to fulfill his promise to pick up the last four men of the ground crew, which he did. The planes were quickly refueled and then the four men from the ground crew climbed into the machines together with the pilots. Half standing, half sitting in the space behind the pilot's seat, bent over the pilot, they were flown from Africa to Sicily."⁴²



This drawing of Günther von Maltzahn in Tunisia at the end of 1942 shows how marked he is by the harshness of the battle.

Six days later, the Axis forces in Tunisia surrendered. When Field Marshal Kesselring visited JG 53 in Sicily in May 1943, he was amazed at how von Maltzahn's wing could be in such good shape after the disaster in Tunisia. But in answer to Kesselring's question about how this could happen, von Maltzahn simply replied: "Herr Field Marshal, unfortunately I cannot reveal that!"⁴³

But by this time, von Maltzahn was suffering greatly personally. On May 17, 1943, his younger brother Hartwig was killed in the Atlantic Ocean. The fact that Günther von Maltzahn was promoted to colonel on June 1, 1943, was of course a small consolation. Around the same time, he himself was diagnosed with malaria.

Then came the ill-fated operation against the Flying Fortresses over Sicily on June 25, 1943. That day, 80 Me 109s were deployed against 120 Flying

Fortresses over Sicily. The result was devastating for the Luftwaffe aviation in Sicily: only four American planes were shot down, and in Messina the dropped bomb load caused terrible devastation. Göring was furious and demanded that an airman from each of the participating fighter groups be court-martialed for cowardice in the face of the enemy.

Contrary to what Johannes Steinhoff* claims in his memoirs, Fighter General Galland shared this view. Field Marshal Wolfram von Richthofen, the C-in-C of the Mediterranean air fleet, wrote in his diary: "The reason for the failures is the declining mood of the airmen. Galland is attacking the fighters, who have recently made poor attacks or not attacked at all. Perhaps he is hitting them a bit too hard – only time will tell."

Like his friend Günther Lützow,* von Maltzahn stood in solidarity with the fighter pilots. After reading the court-martial order from Göring to his airmen, von Maltzahn looked up and said with a grim expression: "Gentlemen, I think any comment is superfluous. I am ashamed to have to read such an order to you."⁴⁴

Many JG 53 veterans believe that it was mainly thanks to von Maltzahn that the threat of court martial was never carried out. One of them, his adjutant Wolfgang Dreifke, said: "Günther von Maltzahn stood as a buffer between us and Göring's attacks, and suffered a great deal of resentment. He took a very sober and detached view of the situation at the time. After it became clear that the Allies had gained a foothold in Sicily [in July 1943], he told us in the inner circle that he thought the war was lost."



Confrontation in Sicily in the summer of 1943: Fighter general Adolf Galland is seen standing in a dark uniform with his hand on his watch. To his right are Günther Lützow (left) and Günther von Maltzahn. Johannes Steinhoff, the commander of JG 77, is in the background on the right in the picture.

Shortly afterwards, von Maltzahn suffered a very serious attack of malaria and is hospitalized for several months. He returns to the unit in Italy in early September 1943, only to receive two more tough personal blows. On September 2, 1943, his friend Franz Schiess, with whom von Maltzahn had participated in more than one hundred air battles, was shot down by American fighters over the sea off Italy and died. Schiess had by then achieved 67 air victories – exactly one less than von Maltzahn – and had been awarded the Knight's Cross. "In him I had my best friend, on whom I could rely firmly", wrote von Maltzahn.

Film clip:

A Spitfire from RAF 253 Squadron passes a captured Me 109 G-6 at an airfield in Sicily in 1943.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZxXsxcT8z8>

Conspiracy against the Führer

Four days later, on September 6, 1943, Günther von Maltzahn's brother Dankward was killed when his Me 109 was shot down by Flying Fortresses over Germany. Dankward had followed in his older brother's footsteps and become a fighter pilot. He was serving as an adjutant in II./JG 27 when he was killed.



Günther von Maltzahn.

At that time, von Maltzahn was so weakened by malaria that on October 4 he was transferred to a staff position in Berlin. The veterans of JG 53 said that it was with great sadness and concern that they paid farewell to their highly respected and popular commander. Field Marshal Wolfram von Richthofen, who succeeded Kesselring as commander of the Luftflotte 2, wrote in his diary: "Von Maltzahn was in the front line of the fire from the beginning to the end. He is a real expert. He has commanded his wing in an exemplary manner. It is to his credit that JG 53 is probably the best run fighter wing in the entire Luftwaffe."⁴⁵

Now we arrive at a chapter in Günther von Maltzahn's history that has not been addressed even in the literature on the anti-Nazi resistance in the Third Reich: his role in the conspiracy against Hitler. In fact, several sources identify von Maltzahn as, if not exactly a key figure, at least a person who made important contacts.

It was during his time in Italy in 1943 that von Maltzahn made the special acquaintances of the German military attaché in Rome, General Enno von Rintelen, who was conspiring to overthrow Hitler. Interestingly, von Rintelen had served under the former German ambassador to Rome, Ulrich von Hassell, from 1936 until he was called back to Germany in 1939. Von Hassell would play a key role in the July 20 Plot against Hitler in 1944.

Regular participants at the conspirators' meetings included a young panzer officer by the name of Claus von Stauffenberg. Another one was von Maltzahn's good friend, Colonel Ernst-Günther Baade, who had commanded the anti-aircraft units at the Strait of Messina between Sicily and the mainland. Von Maltzahn confided his political opinion as early as April 1943 to his interpreter in Italy, Gustave René Hocke, who said: "Von Maltzahn was not one of the passive 'whiners'. He was ready to act!"⁴⁶

One question was how the conspirators would seize power in Germany once Hitler had been eliminated. It was Baade who raised the idea that if centrally located commanders in the German Home Defense Aviation could be recruited, the Air Force could be employed to take control of the entire country. The Air Force was the single largest military organization in Germany, so it was a brilliant idea – if it could be implemented.

The opportunity to make the necessary contacts came when von Maltzahn, having been relieved from his post as commander of JG 53, was placed on the staff of General Hubert Weise, Luftwaffenbefehlshaber Mitte and thus the commander of the Air Defense of

Germany – including the Air Force. Whether it was the conspirators who, through their network of secret contacts, arranged for von Maltzahn to be placed with Weise is perhaps not a matter for speculation, but the fact is that soon after von Maltzahn's arrival at the Berlin headquarters, Weise was involved in the conspiracy. "Although he was not the author of the Anti-Aircraft Force's plot, Weise was one of its principal actors and perfectly placed to carry it out", wrote Froechtenigt Harper.⁴⁷



General Hubert Weise.



Colonel Ernst-Günther Baade.

On November 5, 1943, von Maltzahn called Friedrich-Karl von Plehwe, von Rintelen's old Embassy Assistant, to a secret meeting of the conspirators in Weise's headquarters. Von Maltzahn was able to do this because von Plehwe was an old friend of the von Maltzahn family. At this meeting, von Maltzahn raised the question of whether it was possible to recruit Field Marshal Rommel into the conspiracy, but von Plehwe, who had served on Rommel's staff, advised against it, saying that Rommel was still a strong supporter of Hitler.⁴⁸

However, this "branch" of the anti-Hitler conspiracy was dispersed in December 1943, when von Maltzahn was sent back to Italy – where he was placed as a fighter commander – while Weise was shortly afterwards dismissed from his position as Luftwaffenbefehlshaber Mitte. General von Rintelen had also been transferred from the embassy in Rome, so Italy was at a standstill as far as the conspiracy against Hitler was concerned.

Return to Italy

Von Maltzahn now came into regular contact with his airmen again, and did his best to support their fight. Through his organization of air operations in Italy, the German fighter aviation in Italy achieved some of its last successes – despite an average numerical inferiority of one to nineteen. On December 28, 1943, von Maltzahn concentrated the German fighters

against a formation of four-engine B-24 Liberator bombers, from which eleven were shot down. The loss was so severe that U.S. 47th Heavy Bomb Group was taken out of action for five full weeks as a result.

On February 15, 1944, von Maltzahn witnessed something no one on the German side had expected when American bombers destroyed the old Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino. After the battle of Monte Cassino, JG 53 was transferred from Italy and split between the Eastern Front and the Reich Air Defense. Von Maltzahn was left in Italy with 50 German fighters. In the following months, von Richthofen took his frustrations out on von Maltzahn, who was accused of not demanding enough from the fighters. It may well be that von Richthofen was right in that criticism.

Film clip:

The bombing of Monte Cassino

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8afP6GetP8>

When the July 20 Plot against Hitler occurred, von Maltzahn was outside the center of events. He was lucky enough to escape the wave of arrests that followed the failed attack. However, two of his relatives – his great-grandfather's brother, 74-year-old Helmut Freiherr von Maltzahn, and his cousin, Kurt von Plettenberg – were arrested as accomplices to the coup plot. The elder von Maltzahn was later released on parole due to failing health, but von Plettenberg was subjected to severe torture.

At about the same time, von Maltzahn clashed with his superiors in Italy over a much smaller issue, but for the nobleman's son it was a matter of honor: the German military – now the masters of Italy – had decided that the Italian airmen still fighting on the side of the Luftwaffe should be transferred to the Luftwaffe. The proud Italians protested vehemently against this and found an ally in von Maltzahn – which resulted in his immediate dismissal. While the old commander of JG 27, Eduard Neumann, took over as fighter commander in northern Italy, Günther von Maltzahn was transferred in August 1944 to Galland's Fighter Command Staff in Berlin.

In November 1944, von Maltzahn attended the famous "Areopagus", the major air force conference to find solutions for the deteriorating air war situation, which ended in terrible enmity between the fighter and bomber pilots. Two months later, he attended a conspiratorial meeting against Göring at Colonel Hannes Trautloft's hunting lodge at Wannsee, where he played an important role, according to the accounts of both Eduard Neumann and Johannes Steinhoff.

At this meeting, von Maltzahn expressed his outrage that Göring was prepared to send young boys – some as young as 15 or 16 years old – to fight against the Allied air force. He called it "murder on a scale that Stalin would have loved". He recounted how horrified he had been when, on the Eastern Front in 1941, he saw Soviet airmen, "many of them just boys", being shot down while flying outdated aircraft, often with no more than 20 hours of flight training.⁴⁹ He did not want that to happen to young German boys. A lively discussion ensued. Some argued that the war was lost and that it was important to hold out until the end. Then Eduard Neumann interrupted: "Hold out? Why, when the end is near?" – "Because," von Maltzahn replied firmly, "we cannot just watch crim-

inals drag the country into the abyss. And because there is also a responsibility to history."⁵⁰ Silence followed. After a while, it is von Maltzahn who broke the silence: "It would be irresponsible to simply resign and sit in the fighter pilot's home in Wiessee. It is our duty to act according to our convictions. The only question is how?" That was when the redeeming phrase was uttered: "The fat man [Göring] must go!" It was Lützow who said what everyone was thinking.

Jet Bomber Instructor

Although von Maltzahn boldly acted as something of Lützow's right-hand man during the disastrous meeting with Göring, he did not suffer any reprisals for this. On the contrary, on February 15, 1945, he was instead placed on the staff of the newly formed 9. *Fliegerdivision* (roughly air corps). This was led by Colonel Hajo Herrmann, who had succeeded Günther Lützow when he was dismissed as commander of the 1. *Jagddivision*. Herrmann is regarded by Lützow and von Maltzahn as too loyal a supporter of the political leadership. He also made a number of controversial proposals – including setting up the "*Rammkommando Elbe*", whose pilots flew suicide missions against Flying Fortresses in April 1945.

The task of the 9. *Fliegerdivision* was to lead the old bomber units that had been converted into fighter units. Four of these were created in November 1944: *Kampfjagdgeschwader* ("bomber fighter wings") KG(J) 6, 27, 54, and 55. The idea was that they would all be equipped with jet planes. First up was KG(J) 54, which began operations with the Me 262 in early 1945. This took place before the bombers had learned fighter tactics, with devastating results for the Germans themselves.

As an experienced fighter pilot, von Maltzahn's task was to assist Herrmann, himself a former bomber pilot, in making the bomber fighter units work. Herrmann said: "Von Maltzahn was three years older than me and radiated professionalism. It was clear that I was dealing with an expert. He energetically took on his new task and quickly gained the confidence of the pilots."⁵¹

One of von Maltzahn's first actions was to look for a new wing commander for KG(J) 54, someone with experience in jet planes. He chose Hansgeorg Bätcher, who had flown more bomber missions than anyone else – on both sides – during the war. Bätcher had most recently commanded an Arado 234 jet bomber group. Working closely with him, von Maltzahn managed to reverse the vicious cycle that KG(J) 54 had fallen into.

While the pilots of KG(J) 6 began training on the Me 262 and KG(J) 55 never saw combat due to fuel shortages, the pilots of KG(J) 27 were deployed on fighter operations against American bombers with Me 109s and Fw 190s in March 1945. The losses are absolutely catastrophic, and it results in a collapse of morale in this unit.

The commander of KG 27 for the past two years has been Rudolf Kiel, who carries the Knight's Cross for hundreds of bombing operations on the Eastern Front. At the "Areopagus" in November 1944, he had suggested playing classical music for the fighters to "fire them up" as they took off on combat missions – a suggestion that Galland countered with derisive laughter. But now Kiel is both demoralized and bitter. In the officers' mess in Linz, Austria, he shoots at a portrait of Hitler, and this is reported by a junior officer. Von Maltzahn and Hajo Herrmann try to save Kiel.



Rudolf Kiel was reported to have shot at a portrait of Hitler but was saved from court-martial by the intervention of Günther von Maltzahn.

"Are you completely crazy or were you drunk?" they ask him. But Kiel has had enough of the madness – "Neither of it, I knew what I was doing," he replies. "Tell them you were drunk," they urge him. Kiel refuses. "Neither I nor Maltzahn can help you," says Herrmann. Kiel just shrugs his shoulders.⁵²

When I met Herrmann in the 1990s, I asked him about this, which he writes about in his book, but without telling us what happened with the court martial. When I asked what had happened, he replied,

"Maltzahn arranged it, there was no court martial", without wanting to go into any details.⁵³

By now, Günther von Maltzahn was badly affected by the war. Although he had survived several plane crashes, two of his brothers had been killed and his health is ruined. But it does not end there. On March 10, 1945, von Maltzahn's relative Kurt von Plettenberg, arrested for the July 20 Plot, committed suicide in prison. Three days later, the 20th birthday of his younger brother, the lastborn Wolf-Wigand, is celebrated. He too wants to follow in the footsteps of his famous older brother and has signed up for fighter pilot training. Although the acute fuel situation almost completely put an end to all pilot training, Wolf-Wigand is killed during flight training eighteen days later, on March 31, 1945.

The Final Mission

On May 2, 1945, Russian soldiers enter the Wodarg family estate. They take away Günther von Maltzahn's father, the almost 78-year-old Gerhard Freiherr von Maltzahn. The family will never see him again. Only many years later did his fate become clear – the Russians had taken him to a nearby sandpit, where they immediately shot him. Günther's mother Helene moved to Lübeck, where she died in 1946.

After a short period in Allied captivity, Günther von Maltzahn settled with his family in Düsseldorf, West Germany. He was never again able to return to his childhood home. After farming for a few years, in 1950 he was hired by the so-called "Amt Blank", the predecessor of the West German Ministry of Defense. There they worked on the formation of the Bundeswehr, the West German armed forces. There were plans to make von Maltzahn inspector of the new air force. But malaria had broken down his health, and



The Wodarg family estate.

cancer again took hold of his weakened body. On June 24, 1953, Günther Freiherr von Maltzahn died of cancer of the lymphatic system. He was then 42 years old.

His daughter Dagmar Helene met a young American soldier in West Germany, William Zirkle, in 1970. They married in 1970 and had four children – Günther von Maltzahn's grandchildren: Sigrid Anne, Micaela, Luise Bettina, and William Wade (referred to as "Wade"). Around 1975 they moved to Atlanta, USA, where Wade, their youngest child, was born. He made his presence felt in the 2000s when he participated in the Iraq war as a Marine Corps officer in the 2nd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion. In the spring of 2004, he experienced the bloody First Battle of Fallujah, where the Americans were forced to leave the city. During this battle, the vehicle in which Wade was traveling was attacked by a suicide bomber. Ten of the sixteen men in the vehicle were killed; Wade survived but was badly burned.

But Wade did not lose heart. "Sometimes I get asked if I would do it again," he says, "and the answer is yes, without a doubt! I could do it again a hundred times!"⁵⁴

Wade returned to Iraq in 2006 – this time as a freelance journalist, "embedded" with the U.S. Army in Ramadi. Later, he also reported from Afghanistan. Today, Wade Zirkle heads the finance company StrongPoint Capital, LLC, in Woodstock, Virginia.

This brings us to the question of whether Günther von Maltzahn was of Jewish descent. Several veterans lived in the belief that he was, and Adolf Galland told us that he used his contacts to protect von Maltzahn. That there were several Jewish soldiers in the Wehrmacht is something that American historian Bryan Mark Rigg has researched and presented in his award-winning book *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers*. But was von Maltzahn Jewish? It would certainly be exciting if he had been, but the answer to that question is a definite no.

The extensive genealogical research of Günther von Maltzahn that I have done – a not too difficult task as it concerns a "noble family" – shows that his father, Baron Gerhard Adolf, belonged to the von Maltzahn family (originating from the village of Moltzahn) which was ennobled in the 13th century. His mother Helene (1884–1946) was a von Borcke, an originally Slavic noble family dating back to at least the 12th century.

So where did the rumor of Günther von Maltzahn's Jewishness come from? The answer to this question came from an interview that I had with his son Falk in 2018: "No, he was not Jewish. I think this reputation is because my grandfather was very critical of Hitler. He used to say that he had a Jewish ancestor, although it was not true. As a pure protest, I think."

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* Glossary, abbreviations, and personalities mentioned

II./JG 53, Second *Gruppe* (group) of German *Jagdgeschwader* (fighter wing) 53. A *Jagdgeschwader* normally had three *Gruppe*, each with three *Staffel* of 12 aircraft.

Condor Legion, the German air force unit in the Spanish Civil War.

Enigma, a cipher machine used by the Germans.

Erdmann von Cramon-Taubadel, Hans-Jürgen, (1901–1985) German fighter pilot. Commanded JG 53 between January 1940 and September 30, 1940, after which he spent the rest of the war in various staff positions.

Feldwebel, German military rank, equivalent of Technical Sergeant in the USAAF.

Galland, Adolf, (1912–1996) German fighter ace and later inspector of the Fighter Air Arm.

GC III/7, the third *Groupe de Chasse* (fighter group) of French *Escadre de Chasse* (fighter wing) 7. An *Escadre de Chasse* normally comprised of three *Groupe de Chasse*, each with three to four *Escadrille* of 10–12 aircraft apiece.

GR II/52, the second *Groupe de Reconnaissance* (reconnaissance group) of French *Escadre de Reconnaissance* (reconnaissance wing) 52.

Gruppe, German aviation group.

Jafü, Jagdfliegerführer, the commander of the German fighter units within a given territory.

KG, Kampfgeschwader, German bomber wing,

Luftflotte, German air fleet, comprised of several air corps, each of several wings.

Lützow, Günther, (1912–1945) German fighter pilot, commander of JG 3 until 1942, after which he served in Fighter General Adolf Galland's staff.

Mölders, Werner, (1913–1941), the first “great” German fighter ace of World War II, appointed inspector of the Fighter Air Arm in 1941. Perished in an aircraft crash.

Oberfeldwebel, German military rank, equivalent of Master Sergeant in the USAAF.

Oberleutnant, German military rank, equivalent of First Lieutenant in the USAAF.

Schiess, Franz, (1912–1943) German fighter pilot in the staff squadron of JG 53. Killed in action on September 2, 1943.

Schwarm, German tactical fighter formation, comprised of four aircraft.

Steinhoff, Johannes, (1913–1994) German fighter pilot in World War II, rose to become Chairman of the NATO Military Committee after the war.

StG, Stukageschwader, German dive-bomber wing.

Stukageschwader, German dive-bomber wing.

Trautloft, Hannes, (1912–1995) German fighter pilot, commander of JG 54 until 1943, after which he served in Fighter General Adolf Galland's staff.

Unteroffizier, German military rank, equivalent of Sergeant in the USAAF.

Werknummer, (German) serial number of a produced aircraft.

Notes

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