

Erich Rudorffer: Ace Pilot

Contributed by Frank Parker

IN THE lead up to the Classic Fighters Airshow at Omasaka I had the opportunity to fly a unique aircraft, a reproduction Focke Wulf 190. But this is a story of a person, not an aircraft. The registration of the aircraft is ZK-RFR and if you say that phonetically it is easy to trip over your tongue. Enquiry into this mouthful found it was for 'Erich Rudorffer' the pilot in whose livery the aircraft is presented.

In WW I the French 'Press' described pilot Adolphe Pegoud as l'As (translate Ace) when he became the first pilot to shoot down five German aircraft. From that event, and remnants of chivalry surrounding air combat in World War I, pilots who achieved five victories were acknowledged as an Ace, a recognition of experience and prowess.

In WW II German Luftwaffe pilots, over 100 of whom accomplished scores of more than 100 kills, and the highest scoring Ace of all time Erich Hartmann with a tally of 352, were to re-write the meaning of the term. This was in comparison with other nations with top scores of, Japan 87, Soviet Union 62, UK and Commonwealth 51, USAAF 48. (New Zealand's top scoring Ace, Colin Gray, achieved 28 kills). This disparity was not because the Germans were 'better' pilots than their Commonwealth, American or indeed Japanese contemporaries, but a result of extended tours of frontline duty.

The standard period of combat duty for a Commonwealth Fighter Pilot (RAF, RAAF, RNZAF) was based around 200 hours flying or 50 sorties, more or less. After this time pilots were removed from front line duty to Command or Training oriented roles, perhaps followed by further Operational tours. By contrast, many Luftwaffe pilots saw continuous frontline service from the outbreak of the war until the last days in May 1945. Indeed a few

of them had seen service in the Spanish Civil War of 1936, a time when many Luftwaffe tactics had been developed.

Erich Rudorffer was one of these pilots. He saw continuous active service from France in 1940 to Russia in 1945 and survived the war. He achieved 222 Victories, including 12 in the Messerschmitt 262, becoming one of the first and few Jet Aces.

Born in Zwochau, Sachsen (near Leipzig) Germany, Rudorffer was a pilot with Lufthansa at the outbreak of WW II. All pilots were transferred to the Luftwaffe and in early 1940 he was

transferred to JG 2 'Richthofen'. (JG is an abbreviation of Jagdgeschwader, Jagd = Fighter (literally meaning hunter), Schwader = Wing, and Richthofen being a reference to the Ace of WW I, the Units 'Patron'). JG 2 Richthofen was initially based in West Germany and then, as the front line moved west, in France.

He claimed his

first victory on 14 May 1940, a French Curtiss 75 Hawk, and had increased this to 8 victories before the fall of France.

Rudorffer flew throughout the Battle of Britain and by the end of 1941 had achieved 40 kills. During 1942 his unit was based in Occupied France operating from the Cherbourg area. It was engaged in Operation 'Cerberus' (Feb 1942) providing fighter cover for three German Battleships making a 'dash' through the English Channel. In August 1942 JG 2 defended against the 'Dieppe' Raid, an early Allied Commando type attack on Occupied Europe. The unit lost 14 aircraft for 59 destroyed. Later in 1942 JG 2 was involved in an interdiction campaign in the English Channel and against UK coastal defences.

In Nov 1942 elements of JG 2 were transferred to Sicily and then Tunisia to participate in the North African Theatre of Operations where two of their pilots, Rudorffer and Kurt Buhligen, would account for one half the units 150 victories in this theatre.



The latest addition to the NZ Warbirds scene is this replica Fw190 in the livery of German Ace Erich Rudorffer.



Erich Rudorffer in 1944 aged 27. German Federal Archive image.

On 9th February 1943 Rudorffer shot down 8 allied aircraft in the space of 32 minutes. While based at Kairouan flying Focke Wulf 190 with JG 2 received advice of an attack by a USAAF task force. The Germans attacked the B-17 Bombers as a defensive fleet of P-40s and P-38s came to defend them. In the ensuing dogfights Rudorffer shot down six P-40s, then at the end of the engagement a further two P-38s. He followed up with a further seven kills on 15th February.

In July 1943 Hauptman (Major) Rudorffer was transferred to Command II JG54 (2nd Gruppe (Group) 54 Fighter Wing) on the Eastern front scoring his first victory in the War with Russia on 7th August.

Multi-Ace was incredible success which for many was a 'Turkey

Stalanist 1930s where any the slightest seen as a threat off to Siberia decimated the and while the aircraft seen Over Wanaka great airshow the hands of pilots they

for the battle hardened Luftwaffe pilots flying vastly superior Messerschmitt and Focke Wulf aircraft.

During a sortie on 24th August 1943, Rudorffer downed 5 Soviet aircraft in 4 minutes and on 11th October created aviation history by claiming 13 kills in the space of 17 minutes.

On the 28th October while based in Latvia he earned his nickname, "Fighter of Libau". While preparing to land, a fleet of 60 Soviet aircraft was observed en route to bomb area airfields. Short on fuel, Rudorffer, single handed, engaged the enemy, forced a retreat and bagged 9 aircraft in 10 minutes.

In December 1944 Rudorffer was trained onto the new Messerschmitt 262 Jet and in February 1945 appointed to Command I JG 7 based north of Hamburg, the mission 'Defence of the Reich', or Home Defence. Despite the overwhelming odds faced by the Luftwaffe pilots in the closing months of the War, Rudorffer claimed 12 kills in the 262, including several heavy bombers.

Following the War, Rudorffer found his way to Australia where

The already to accumulate in this theatre, German pilots Shoot'.

purges of the Officer showing initiative was and marched - or worse, had Soviet military, Polikarpov at Warbirds may now be a attraction, at inexperienced were no match

he flew DC 2 and DC 3 aircraft before a period with Pan Am. As late as 1960 he was involved with flight instruction in Germany.

This remarkable pilot flew over 1000 combat missions, engaged in aerial combat over 300 times. He was shot down by ground action or enemy aircraft 16 times and had to parachute from his aircraft 9 times. His score sheet of 222 victories includes 1 Hawker Tempest (Me 262), 2 Hawk 75, 6 P-40, 7 Hurricane, 7 P-38, 15 Yak 7/9, 40 Spitfire, 58 Il-2 Sturmovic, and 10 B-17 Bombers (Me 262).

He was awarded the 'Knights Cross' on 1st May 1941 (19 Victories), with grades added of 'Oak Leaves' on 11th April 1944 (113 Victories) and 'Swords' on 26th Jan 1945 (210 Victories).

The Aircraft I was fortunate to fly depicts his Fw 190 at Immola, Finland in 1944. Somehow I feel insignificant!

Regards, frankly@xtra.co.nz

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