

CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM

**BLACK CROSS
RED  STAR **STAR****

AIR WAR OVER THE EASTERN FRONT

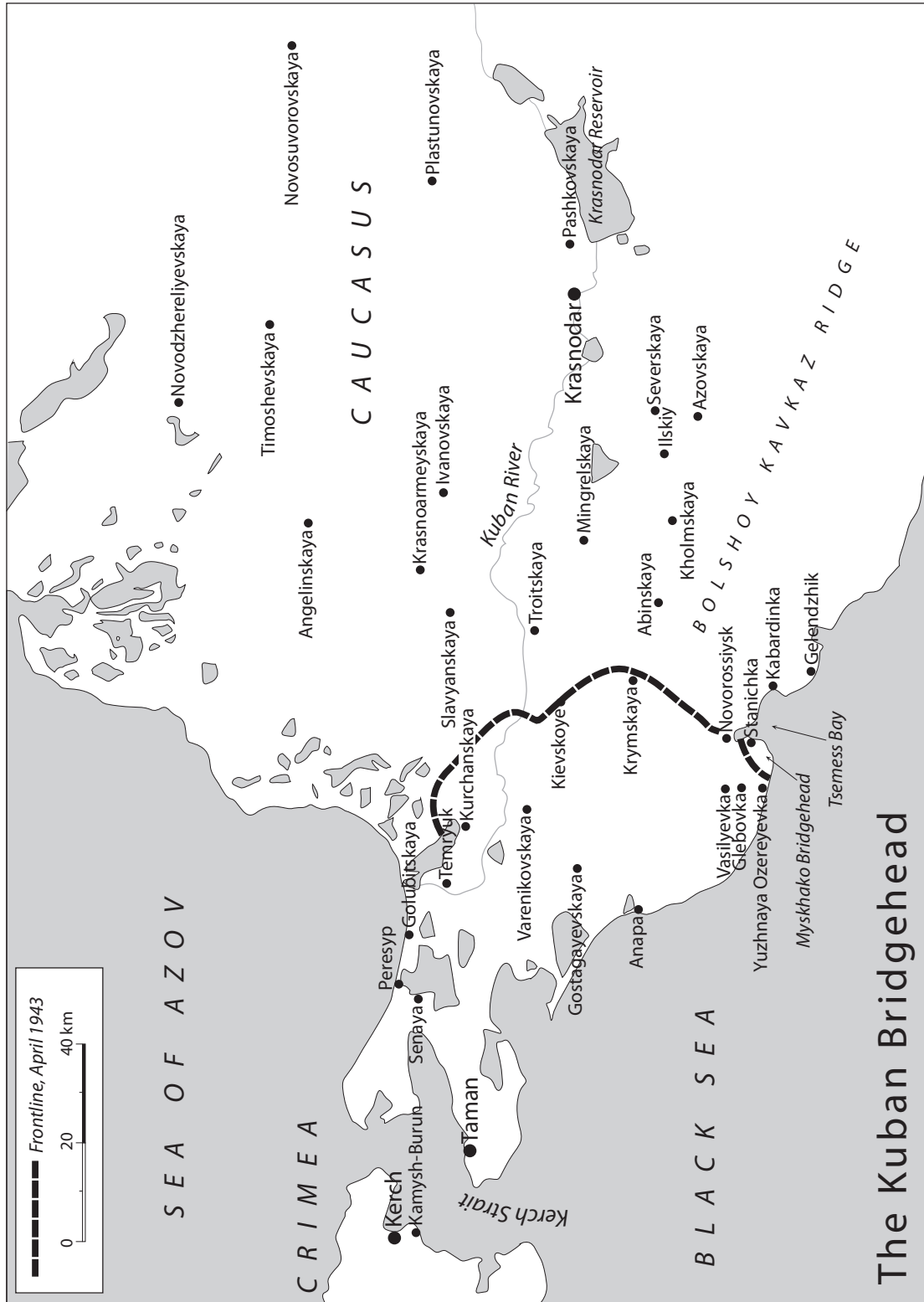


**VOLUME 5 - THE GREAT AIR BATTLES
KUBAN AND KURSK APRIL-JULY 1943**

VAKTEL BOOKS

PART III

FAILURE AND SUCCESS



CHAPTER 5

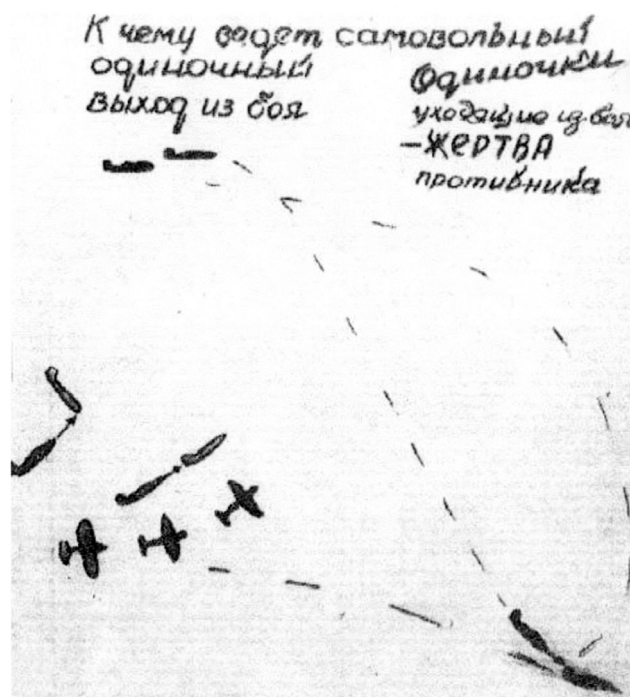
“The Russian Air Force is doing whatever it wants over Krymskaya”

As we have seen, the Soviet command decided to postpone the attack against the Kuban Bridgehead from April 25 to April 29, chiefly because more ammunition had to be brought forward and because the Pe-2 units of 2 BAK had not yet been properly established at the airfields in northwestern Caucasus. Between April 25 and 28, most of the VVS air units in northern Caucasus were rested. The time was used to discuss and improve the combat methods used by the VVS, and this would have a decisive effect on the continued air battle.

In late April, General-Mayor Konstantin Vershinin, the Superior Air Commander in the Northcaucasus Front, invited the aces Aleksandr Pokryshkin (16 GIAP), Pavel Kryukov (16 GIAP), Boris Glinka (45 IAP), and Vladimir Semenishin (298 IAP) to a conference at the Army Headquarters to discuss better methods. “We were served a delicious and generous breakfast in the army headquarters. There was even a carafe of red wine on the table,” a perplexed Pokryshkin wrote. But he was wildly enthusiastic. This was precisely what he had wanted for such a long time. “It was the first time in the war that we were invited to the Army’s headquarters for a technical discussion. It would have been good if such discussions had taken place earlier. One could have generalized good experiences and applied them to all air units.”¹

Clearly, this was the result of the shockingly high losses sustained by 3 IAK’s fighter units even after the Soviets had gained numerical superiority. “Our most important task,” Vershinin told the assembled aces, “is to gain control of the air here at the Kuban.”² Although some tactics had already been improved—such as the scrapping of the obsolete three-plane Vee formation and the adoption of the German *Rotte* system (called *Para*, “Pair,” by the Soviets)—they had not been properly implemented. Quite often, the pilots acted individually when combat broke out, instead of cooperating. The necessity of teamwork in combat had to be inculcated in the units. Another problem was that radio communication, both between the pilots in the air and between the ground control station and the airborne formations, was not used adequately.

During the discussion, Pokryshkin took the opportunity to express the dissatisfaction that the pilots felt over the frequent orders to fly patrols at a fixed altitude and speed “so low that it does not allow us to make steep climbs.” Vershinin listened attentively. He commended Semenishin for his ability to quickly take up the enemy’s tactical methods, draw the correct conclusions, and communicate his rich experience to the young pilots in his unit.³



The *Kubanskaya etazherka*—the “Kuban bookshelf”: This sketch by Aleksandr Pokryshkin shows how the fighter pilots could act with greater flexibility owing to this tactical formation.

Pokryshkin’s maxim for a successful fighter combat—“Altitude, speed, maneuver, attack”—was accepted and sent out to the fighter regiments. And so was the so-called *Kubanskaya etazherka* formation—the “Kuban bookshelf,” a layered formation where the fighters were divided into two or three groups: The lower group, containing half the strength or even two-thirds, acted against the enemy bombers. Between 500 and 1,000 meters above, there was a top cover group whose task it was to engage the enemy’s fighter escort in combat. Then there could also be a third group, positioned high above, to be used as a reserve. Radio communication between these groups and between the formation leader and the ground station was crucial.

The decision was taken to order all regimental commanders to report the lessons drawn from each air combat, with special focus on how the *Paras* worked, immediately after the debriefing that followed each mission. Pokryshkin’s commander, the C-in-C of 216 SAD, General-Mayor Aleksandr Borman, was appointed as the assistant com-

mander of 4 VA.⁴ He was instructed to compile at the end of each day a report on all identified shortcomings and experience identified during the day's air operations and send this to the headquarters. Following a thorough analysis of this report, the conclusions were put down in writing in a special bulletin that was distributed among the air regiments. "Thus," commented Vershinin, "the experience that was gained became the property of all pilots."⁵

Vershinin would also be in regular telephone contact with Borman, who was regarded as one of his best commanders. A reserve of 15 to 20 fighters was set aside under Vershinin's direct command each day, and through minute-to-minute updates on the air situation from Borman, he could dispatch this reserve during the most critical moments.

Aleksandr Sitkovskiy, by then a young Leytenant with 15 IAP, wrote, "Every day, we had a debriefing with the pilots after the missions and air combats, and in heated discussions we analyzed the most successful actions and hammered out the best methods to defeat the enemy. The old fighter tactics that our Air Force had developed, based on the combats with the White Finns and the Japanese militarists were clearly outdated, but the valuable experience gained in the air fighting near Moscow and at Stalingrad had not been obtained by the young pilots who had arrived to replenish our air regiments at Kuban."⁶

It was openly admitted that the German fliers used far superior tactics, and the Soviet aviators were encouraged to study and learn from their enemy. "We were young and strong," said Sitkovskiy, "and the hatred of the invaders that we felt made us fight tenaciously, without respite, until victory. True, we were not always sufficiently experienced, but the desire to defeat the occupiers helped us to endure.

We made many mistakes, such as firing far too long bursts, causing the guns to become red hot and sometimes also to fail, but we learned, although it took many exhausting hours. As for myself, I had to withstand ten to twenty combats with the German aces before their tactics and techniques were completely clear to me."⁷

Bit by bit, the Soviet aviators learned and improved. In the meantime, the preparations for the attack that was supposed to drive the Germans from the Kuban Bridgehead commenced. The attack against Krymskaya was to be supplemented by a surprise strike across the swamp and lagoon-like area on the coast of the Sea of Azov, and for that purpose a whole fleet of small boats were gathered at the ports of Yeysk and Primorsko-Akhtarsk.

With Fliegerkorps I primarily focused against the southern flank of the Kuban Bridgehead, only a few air missions were flown in the north, which allowed the Soviets to build up their fleet of small boats quite undisturbed. It was by pure coincidence that one of III./JG 52's pilots, Oberfeldwebel Edmund Rossmann, discovered what was going on. "I was tasked to introduce a newly arrived young pilot," said Rossmann, "and because of that, I chose to fly with him to the calmer northern area on his first combat mission. We had bombs loaded to our aircraft and flew to drop them against a bridge. There is a large lake in the Temryuk area, and as we flew low over the water in order to catch the Russian defenses by surprise, I suddenly saw the area littered with small boats. They were everywhere! These small vessels were cleverly camouflaged, and had we not flown so low we would not have detected them. We saw no people around them, and there was no anti-aircraft fire. We quickly dropped our bombs and flew back to base, where I reported what I had seen to Major von Bonin."⁸



A group of pilots from III./JG 52. Edmund Rossmann is fourth from the left, Erich Hartmann is seventh from the left, and Walter Krupinski is fourth from the right. (Photo: Rossmann.)

A while later, the Soviet build up was confirmed through information volunteered by deserters from a Soviet penal battalion in the area: "A large number of fishing boats were brought down the Kuban river and on the Kuban dam eastward to Bratskiy [20 km south of Yeysk]. They were then transported at nighttime by land to the points of departure for our reconnaissance and assault troops in the swamp area. It is said to be a total of one hundred barges, small, shallow barges that can hold 4-8 men, ideal for the use in the swamp area."⁹

The Gruppenkommandeur, Major Hubertus von Bonin, immediately forwarded Rossmann's report to the Headquarters of Fliegerkorps I, which reacted quickly. On the night of April 24/25 the first raids were flown against these concentrations of floating vessels.

Meanwhile, on the same night, the Soviets launched heavy air raids against Temryuk, the last German outpost before the "lagoon area," and Taganrog on the northern shore of the Sea of Azov—both places important ports for German motor torpedo boats. Kieseritzky, the Kommandierender Admiral Schwarzes Meer, reported on the attack against Taganrog: "The harbor area was plastered with bombs. The attack which was carried out in waves lasted 3-4 hours. Numerous heavy bombs (probably 250 and 500 kg) were dropped from great height on quays, railroad and docks. A great deal of damage to buildings. Motor fishing vessel No. 2800 was sunk by a bomb while other boats were damaged."¹⁰ Widespread material damage was also caused at Temryuk.¹¹ Meanwhile, other Soviet bombers struck against the German rear area at Krymskaya, as well as against the city of Krymskaya itself and Novorossiysk.

The Luftwaffe continued to raid the Azov Sea harbors on both April 25 and 26. With the front absolutely quiet, 219 out of 262 sorties flown by Fliegerkorps I on April 25 were carried out against Primorsko-Akhtarsk, where the guard ships *MO-13* and *MO-14* were sunk through direct hits. Around twenty other sorties were flown against Soviet positions at Anastasiyevskaya on the northern flank of the Kuban front. This was the day of the Stukas, with 199 sorties flown by Gefechtsverband Kupfer. No Soviet fighters intercepted, and the only loss was a Ju 87 that force-landed at Kerch after sustaining an AA hit in the engine, with both crewmembers being injured.¹²

The reinforcement of Soviet Fifty-sixth Army's positions in front of Krymskaya was also observed by Luftwaffe reconnaissance. Each night, bombers from Fliegerkorps I were sent out in small formations of two to three planes on train hunting missions in the Soviet rear area.

Throughout April 25, the tactical reconnaissance Staffeln were in action over Fifty-sixth Army to locate strong-points. Meanwhile, Bf 109s and Hs 129 anti-tank aircraft flew regular free hunting missions, mostly without spotting any enemy aircraft.¹³ Between 1430 and 1500 hours on that day, nine Ju 88s from KG 51 and five He 111s from III./KG 4 subjected the village of Sheptalskiy, southeast of Krymskaya, where a Soviet troop concentration had been detected, to a devastating bombardment. Two He 111s were lost, one of which was possibly shot down by 15 IAP's Aleksandr Sitkovskiy, who thus scored his first victory.



ERICH HARTMANN GEBO. 19. 4. 1922.
SPITZNAME (BUBI) STAMMT VON MIR

Erich "Bubi" Hartmann in his Bf 109. This photograph, taken by Alfred Grislawski in the spring of 1943, shows the red "Karaya" heart, the insignia of 9. "Karayastaffel"/JG 52. The pilots used to write their girlfriends' names inside the heart, but this was before Hartmann had met his fiancée Ursula, so he just had "Dicker Max" ("Fat Max") written inside the heart. The photo is from Grislawski's personal photo album, and beneath the photo, Grislawski had written: "Erich Hartmann, born April 19, 1922. Nickname (Bubi) was invented by me."

Shortly afterward, an inconclusive clash took place between Yak-1s from 293 IAP and Bf 109s of 13./JG 52, with both sides making unsubstantiated victory claims. In fact, the only aircraft that 4 VA lost on April 25 were two reconnaissance Pe-2s, one missing after a sortie (with no matching German report) and another due to an accident.

The following night there was reduced Soviet air activity, with no bombs dropped against Temryuk, but a smaller raid against Anapa and Novorossiysk, while the Luftwaffe continued its train hunting.

Cloudy weather with limited visibility held most aircraft on the ground in the morning on April 26. At 1047 hours, 7./JG 52's Leutnant Erich Hartmann and his wingman took off from Taman for a weather reconnaissance mission.¹⁴ When he landed shortly before noon, Hartmann could not only report improving weather, but also a new victory—his eighth in total. Hartmann identified the shot down aircraft as an "R-5," but Soviet records shows it to be an I-15bis. 62 IAP/VVS ChF had sent out two such planes on a reconnaissance mission to search for enemy MTBs, and one of them was lost.

When the skies cleared at around that time, Fliegerkorps I was dispatched against the Soviet buildup of boats

in the north. On Hartmann's next mission of the day, flown, with his teacher in air combat, Leutnant Alfred Grislawski, he took off from Taman at 1315 hours to escort Stukas, and landed one hour and ten minutes later in Mariupol on the northern side of the Sea of Azov.¹⁵ This was a mission to escort nineteen Stukas from Gefechtsverband Kupfer against the port of Primorsko-Akhtarsk. Meanwhile, sixty-one Stukas from Fliegerkorps VIII in the Ukraine attacked the port of Yeysk, where three seiner fishing boats and a motorboat were sunk.

These attacks were carried out without encountering any opposition in the air, and nothing but weak anti-aircraft fire.¹⁶ German XXXIX Mountain Corps on the Kuban front's northern flank reported no Soviet air activity on April 26—in stark contrast to the Krymskaya sector, where repeated successful German air attacks forced Vershinin to send his fighter units into the air. The War Diary of German XXXIV Army Corps at Krymskaya noted: "Since noon there has been a strong air activity on the Eastern front. Our bomber formations were repeatedly attacked by Russian fighters."¹⁷

Most of these resulted in very brief scraps with no losses to either side. On two occasions, at noon and later in the afternoon, II./JG 3's Leutnant Wolf Ettl and his wingman returned after such combats with claims for altogether four La-5s shot down (three by Ettl, bringing his total score to 95). Once again, Ettl appears to have overestimated his successes considerably, since no such aircraft were lost on that day. The Soviet air losses in the Kuban area on April 26 were limited to three Yak-1s from 3 IAK, with a fourth carrying out a belly-landing, plus the naval I-15bis that Hartmann shot down.

Two of these Yakovlevs were lost to Oberfeldwebel Rudi Trenkel of I./JG 52 at around 1400 hours (German time): 812 IAP's Starshiy Leytenant Dmitriy Tyugayev was killed and the pilot of the second machine managed to con-

duct a belly-landing. Trenkel's mission was to clear the sky for a formation of twelve He 111s that came in forty minutes later to bomb Soviet Fifty-sixth Army's rear area east of Krymskaya.¹⁸

Two hours later, twenty-five Stukas from II./StG 77 took off to strike a concentration of Soviet vehicles in Abinskaya.¹⁹ The method applied during this raid, detailed in a report by Soviet 3 IAK, is quite indicative of the deliberate tactics used by the Luftwaffe:

At 1622 hours, an Fw 189 reconnaissance aircraft swept past above Abinskaya at 2,000 meters altitude, heading from the east to the west, probably to confirm that the target was still in place.²⁰ At 1625, German air surveillance at the front reported that twenty-three Ju 87s without fighter escort crossed the front-line at Krymskaya, on an easterly course.²¹ At 1630, a Bf 109 Rotte passed 2,500 meters above Abinskaya, heading north. This was followed by a second Rotte ten minutes later—the fighter sweep intended to clear the sky of Soviet fighters. Another five minutes later, the Stukas approached Abinskaya from the south. These were divided into two formations, the largest of which flew in the front without any fighter escort, and the trailing formation consisting of about eight Ju 87s and two Bf 109s two minutes behind. They flew at between 1,500 to 2,000 meters altitude in a shallow dive. Around three kilometers before reaching the target, the leading formation split up into two groups, turning to each side, where after they carried out their dive-bombing from two directions. The Stukas recovered from their dive at 300 meters height and departed from the target area in sharp turns to the right or to the left. A while later, the second group emerged from the north and carried out a similar dive-bombing attack.²²

They were met by a powerful defense in the form of both fighters and ground fire, with one Ju 87 getting shot down and three others sustaining combat damage.²³ On the Soviet side, Starshiy Leytenant Maksim Tomarev, a newcomer in 274 IAP, was credited with the shooting down of a Bf 109 and a Ju 87 for his first two victories. It is possible that the Bf 109 registered as badly shot up by I./JG 52 on this day was the one claimed by Tomarev. In any case, no Soviet losses were sustained—an indication that the Soviet Air Force was catching up.

Shortly afterward, at 1715 hours, the German air surveillance at Krymskaya saw nineteen He 111s and three Ju 88s passing in the air above the front-line. This was the next raid against Abinskaya, and it was intercepted by several Yak fighters from 148 IAP and 812 IAP. In a frantic combat, the nine escorting Bf 109s fought hard to protect the bombers. Hauptmann Josef Haiböck and



Trolleys are used to bring forward bombs which shall be loaded onto Ju 87 D Stukas for another mission over the Kuban bridgehead.

Thirty-one-year-old Mayor Ivan Rybin of 148 IAP is posing for a photograph in front of his Yak-1. This photo was taken at Yelizavetinskaya Airdrome in April 1943, only days before his death when ramming the He 111 piloted by Leutnant Hampeler Schilling of 8./KG 55 "Greif." Rybin qualified from the Yeysk Military Aviation School of Marine Pilots in 1932. He participated in the Winter War against Finland in 1939/1940 and was in action as a fighter pilot against Germany from the first day of the war. His greatest successes were achieved during the Battle of Stalingrad, when he was credited with nine victories in a fortnight. After an article was published about this in *Pravda*, the security personnel in Saratov collected money to purchase a Yak-1 for Rybin. This machine was handed over to him in early 1943 and was the one in which he fought his last combat. The inscription on the fuselage reads: "To the Stalin Falcon Rybin Ivan from Sartov's security officers." (Stalin Falcon was what the Soviet fighter pilots were called.) Rybin was first buried in the village of Yelizavetinskaya, but according to his wife's wishes his earthly remains were later moved to the Vsesvyatskiy Cemetery in Krasnodar, where he still rests.



Unteroffizier Hans Kastenhuber each shot down one of the Yakovlevs (although the former misidentified his victim as an "Airacobra"). Having claimed a Bf 109, 812 IAP's Starshiy Serzhant Ivan Fyodorov bailed out with a head wound and parachuted to safety. Mayor Ivan Rybin, a veteran in 148 IAP with 12 victories in 168 combat missions since the beginning of the war, had his plane set on fire, but managed to direct it straight toward a Heinkel 111, which was badly damaged in the ramming. While Rybin fell to his death, Leutnant Hampeler Schilling, the pilot of the crippled bomber, "G1+ES" of 8./KG 55, managed to nurse it across the German lines to Varenikovskaya, where it crashed. The whole crew survived, albeit with injuries. For his feat, and his previous accomplishments, Rybin was posthumously appointed a Hero of the Soviet Union.²⁴

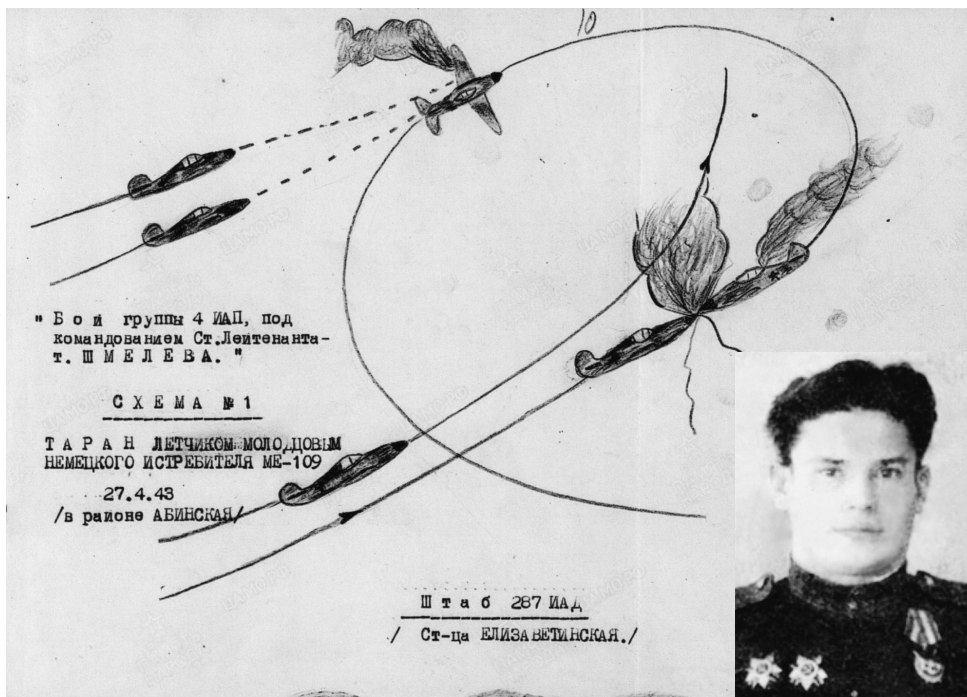
The returning German airmen had every reason to look into the future with concern. If anything, the two days April 25-26 had showed very good results from Vershinin's efforts to improve the quality of the Soviet air combat methods. Between April 17, when Operation "Neptune" began, and April 24, when it was finally called off, the Soviets had lost 149 aircraft and the Germans 24 on operations at Kuban, i.e. a loss rate of more than six Soviet planes for every German. However, for April 26 the ratio was much more even: Five Soviet and four German aircraft lost. Two other tendencies began to emerge: As the Soviet results got better, their overclaiming—which in the previous weeks indeed had been huge—dropped considerably, while the Luftwaffe fighter pilots instead started to increase their overclaiming. Soviet fighter pilots reported seven enemy aircraft shot down at Kuban on April 25 and 26, while the Luftwaffe fighter pilots claimed three times more aerial victories than the actual Soviet losses.

Indeed, there had been a far lower activity in the air, with 262 Luftwaffe day sorties on April 25 and 91 on April 26, against 100 and 190 respectively from the Soviet side, and the question was what it would look like when the Soviet ground attack broke out.

Actually, April 27, which saw a slight increase in the air activity, with 132 German and 216 Soviet sorties being flown in daytime, not only saw the leveled loss ratio continue, but also the highest loss rate sustained by Fliegerkorps I since the fighting over the Kuban Bridgehead had started, 7.5 percent (which can be compared with 0.5 percent on April 20). Owing to their more experienced pilots and better fighter planes, the Luftwaffe still managed to deal their enemy the highest losses, but the ratio confirmed the tendency of the past two days: Six German planes were lost in combat, with another three badly damaged, while the Soviets lost thirteen aircraft. The Soviet fighter pilots reported 16 victories and the Luftwaffe pilots 40—an "overclaim ratio" of 2.7 : 1 by the Soviets and 3.1 : 1 by the Luftwaffe airmen.

Tuesday April 27 began just as the previous day, with thick clouds and even ground fog that made all flying difficult until clearing towards noon. At 1030 hours, Leutnant Grislawski of 7./JG 52 took off together with his Schwarm for a free hunting mission. Back at the airfield everyone was waiting feverishly for his one hundredth victory—his score had stood at 99 since a couple of days back, and he had not made any contact with the enemy since then. Twenty-five minutes later, an air surveillance post of the 97th Jäger Division near Krymskaya reported: "Five LaGG-3 in air combat with two Bf 109s. 1055 hours 1 LaGG-3 shot down by one of our fighters. The pilot bailed out."²⁵ While 291 IAP's Mladshiy Leytenant Lev Svetov descended in his parachute down to German troops that would take him prisoner, Alfred Grislawski returned to base to receive congratulations for his 100th victory.

Svetov was interned in POW Camp Oflag 122 in Bad Salzdetfurth south of Hannover and put to work as a slave laborer in the nearby potash mine. He was liberated by British troops on April 10, 1945, repatriated, and, having passed the control procedure to investigate whether he had cooperated with the Germans, he was demobilized on December 11, 1945 and returned home.²⁶



This sketch from 287 IAD's War Diary shows how Günther Rall set Leytenant Petr Molodtsov's Yak-1 ablaze, after which Molodtsov turned his aircraft and dived to ram Leutnant Theo Schierbaum's Bf 109 from II./JG 52. Molodtsov (inserted in the sketch) survived by bailing out. Molodtsov was posted as missing after a combat mission to Riga on November 25, 1944. His final score was three victories, achieved in 116 combat missions. (TsAMO, f. 319, op. 0004798, d. 0096, l. 11.)

Otherwise April 27, 1943 was calm, in the air as well as on the ground, until two in the afternoon (German time), when Ju 88s of KG 51 and He 111s were sent to raid Soviet positions at Sheptalskiy, southeast of Krymskaya. General-Mayor Borman ordered six Yak-1s from 4 IAP up from the airfield at Abinskaya. Led by Starshiy Leytenant Ilya Shmelyov, they climbed toward the assigned area and spotted six He 111s but were themselves attacked by the fighter escort.²⁷ While the air combat raged, the Soviet anti-aircraft artillery fired straight into the furball of aircraft, friendly as well as hostile.²⁸

Hauptmann Günther Rall of 8./JG 52 hit one of the Yaks in the wing, setting it ablaze. But while Rall announced his 120th victory, watching the Yak-1 descend in flames, the pilot of this aircraft, 22-year-old Mladshiy Leytenant Petr Molodtsov was heard shouting over the Russian R/T: "Take this, you Fascist scum! I, Molodtsov, will ram!"²⁹ He directed his machine straight down toward a lower flying Rotte of Bf 109s and rammed one of them frontally.³⁰ This might have been Leutnant Theo Schierbaum's aircraft from II./JG 52, which was severely damaged and the pilot wounded. Molodtsov managed to save himself by bailing out, but he had not reached the ground before Feldwebel Werner Quast of II./JG 52 (whose wingman Schierbaum might have been) shot down and killed Molodtsov's comrade Leytenant Anatoliy Kulakov, who fell to his death.³¹ Minutes later, 8./JG 52's Leutnant Friedrich Obleser shot down a third pilot from 4 IAP, Mladshiy Leytenant Sergey Nechayev, who was also killed.³²

Two hours later, the Soviet ground troops launched another limited attack to test the German defenses at Krymskaya. This was supported by both Il-2s and Bostons, supplied with a heavy fighter escort. At 1623 hours, Generalleutnant Ernst Rupp, 97th Jäger Division's commander reported "continuous [enemy] air attacks."³³ The air fight-

ing reached a climax at 1700 hours, when three Stukagruppen were concentrated against Sheptalskiy. Here, five out of eight Yak-1s in 402 IAP were lost³⁴ while four Stukas were shot down, three of which were total losses, and two more were damaged. II./JG 3 and 13./JG 52 attacked the Boston bombers employed by the Soviets and claimed three shot down, although in fact no such aircraft was lost. Oberleutnant Joachim Kirschner of the former unit reported the destruction of two Bostons, one of which was recorded as his one hundredth victory.

Quite interestingly, Unteroffizier Wilhelm Hauswirth of 8./JG 52 reported two of the fighters claimed shot down by him late on this day as Spitfires. It is said that the first encounter between Soviet Spitfires and the Luftwaffe took place on April 28, but the fact is that pilots of 57 GIAP had already on April 25 carried out 29 sorties in the Kuban area in their new Lend Lease Spitfires to familiarize themselves with the combat area, and to protect their own airfield at Popovicheskaya airfield (today Kalininskaya), 45 km NW of Krasnodar. The next day they flew 17 such sorties—all without encountering the enemy. On April 27, 57 GIAP Spitfires flew two combat missions to escort Pe-2 reconnaissance aircraft to the Krymskaya area. The last of these was carried out by Kapitan Viktor Chernetsov and his wingman, Serzhant Pavel Ryabov.

Since there was no German intelligence report about the Soviet Spitfires, the only plausible explanation for Hauswirth's claims is that he actually engaged the Spitfires. What makes it even more curious is that Hauswirth's claims were made at 1707 and 1708 hours near Yelizavetinskaya—the airfield where the Spitfire flown by Serzhant Ryabov was reported to have crashed in a landing accident at about that time.

The legendary Spitfire was brought into combat on the Soviet side by 57 GIAP (formerly 36 IAP). However, it was

Spitfires of the old Mark Vb model, and these were worn out machines that had served with the RAF in Egypt in the summer of 1942. Most of them had been manufactured in January-March 1942, and several had been repaired after sustaining damage. Thus, for instance, Spitfire BM189 which served with No. 611 Squadron, RAF, had hit high tension cables and made a wheels-up landing in August 1942, Spitfire BM372, of No. 401 Squadron, RAF, had collided with another aircraft while taxiing in October 1942. Soviet Spitfire AD236 had the most famous history: It was delivered to the RAF in 1941 and served with Squadrons Nos. Nos. 602, 81, and 132, and had undergone repairs following severe damage. In the former unit, it had been flown by the Irish 28-victory ace Wing Commander Brendan "Paddy" Finucane.³⁵

The first 35 Spitfires arrived at Basra in British-controlled Iraq, on the ship *City of Derby*, in January 1943 and were handed over to the Soviets in early February. More Spitfires arrived at the end of March. After 132 flight hours allowing for mock combat in Spitfires for each pilot, 57 GIAP was transferred to General-Mayor Borman's 216 SAD on April 20, 1943. By that time, this was one of the most powerful Diviziya of the entire VVS, consisting of five air regiments with 114 aircraft:

16 GIAP and 45 IAP with altogether 48 Airacobras
and 8 Kittyhawks
42 GIAP with 14 Yak-1s
765 ShAP with 15 Il-2 Shturmoviks
57 GIAP with 29 Spitfire Vb.

These reinforcements arrived, together with the remaining 200 aircraft of 2 BAK and 3 IAK, just in time for the Soviet offensive, slated for April 29. Both sides were preparing for this attack, which the Germans were well aware of. From 0800 hours on April 28, Fliegerkorps I continued to hammer the Soviet buildup areas east of Krymskaya, flying 264 sorties on that day. Vershinin allowed most of his aviators another day's rest, and only 204 flights were made. Nevertheless, heavy air fighting took place, with the German fighter pilots claiming 37 victories while 22 Soviet aircraft were shot down—all of which were fighters. 287 IAD (4 IAP, 148 IAP, and 293 IAP) took a particularly heavy beating, losing twelve Yak-1s (with one more belly-landing with severe damage) and five pilots (three from 148 IAP).³⁶ 265 IAD lost six Yak-1s from 291 IAP and 812 IAP.³⁷

Apparently, on this day the Luftwaffe could utilize its numerical superiority, for only seven German aircraft were shot down, of which four were total losses. But a certain confusion on the Soviet side also aided the Germans, as we shall see.

At 1215 (German time) the first acknowledged combat between Soviet Spitfires and the Luftwaffe took place. 216 SAD dispatched four 57 GIAP Spitfires led by Starshiy Leytenant Viktor Radkevich, and four Airacobras from 16 GIAP (the pairs Pokryshkin – Stepanov and Rechkalov – Starshiy Serzhant Petr Tabachenko) at 1145 hours (German time), to patrol the area in the Abinskaya-sector at 3,500 meters altitude. All of the pilots on this mission were seasoned veterans. The Spitfire pilots had all been in action



Werner Quast (1920-1962) was called "Quax" by his comrades in JG 52. It was a pun on his name, but it alluded to "Quax, der Bruchpilot" (Quax, the Crash Pilot), a popular comedy movie from 1941 about a hopeless pilot who crashes all his aircraft. However, it was only a joke. Werner Quast was a very skillful pilot. Posted to II./JG 52 in September 1942, he rapidly rose to fame, claiming forty-four victories between April and June 1943. After scoring his eighty-fourth kill on August 7, 1943, Quast was rammed by a Soviet aircraft, bailed out and was captured by Soviet troops. After the war, Quast became a helicopter pilot instructor for the Heeresfliegerwaffenschule, Bundeswehr. During a demonstration flight for the Bundeswehr on July 12, 1962, his Alouette III helicopter flew into the cable of an illegal cable railway and crashed, killing all five occupants. The cable railway owner committed suicide. (*Passauer Neue Presse*, July 14, 1962.)

since late 1941 and each had experience of between 200 and 250 combat sorties. Still, the mission would not go the Soviet way.

Approaching the assigned sector, the pilots spotted twelve Ju 87s that were bombing Soviet positions. With the Airacobras staying behind, Radkevich led his wingman, Leytenant Nikolay Skvortsov, to attack. When they pulled out of the attack, the two Spitfires became separated. That was the moment one of the pilots of the escorting Bf 109s had been waiting for. This was Günther Rall, and he was about to score his 121st victory, which would put him alongside Gerhard Barkhorn as JG 52's leading ace. In his memoirs, Rall wrote:

"On April 28th we once again escorted bombers [...] when I discovered a quickly approaching small group of fighters in the distance. I identified some of them as LaGG types, without a doubt—but one of the aircraft looks different, it is slimmer, with elliptical wings: A Spitfire! I am shocked. Spitfires—here? Had the Royal Air Force sent one of its squadrons here, or perhaps even larger units? Very quickly, I get into position behind the British aircraft and open fire."³⁸

This combat had several witnesses on the ground. Mikhail Ayvazyan, by then a twelve-year-old Russian boy from Novorossiysk, remembers how he, his mother, and a group of his friends saw a German troop column stop, with everyone throwing back their heads, just as Mikhail, to watch the air combat. Machine gun fire was heard and one of the fighter planes caught fire. A parachute canopy blossomed in the sky.³⁹ The Luftwaffe Flak battalion at Krymskaya reported, "1220 hours 6 enemy fighters, including 2 *Spitfeyre* [sic] with English markings in 3,000 meters altitude. One MiGG [sic] and one *Spitfeyre* shot down by German fighters at 1220 hours. Both pilots bailed out, probably over the German side."⁴⁰

Mikhail Ayvazyan saw how one of the parachuting pilots landed close to the German troop column. Soldiers came rushing toward the airman, but were met with pistol fire, and had to take cover. A brief firefight ensued. But with no hope to escape, and surrounded by enemy soldiers, the Soviet pilot fought on until he had only one bullet left, which he saved for himself. When the shooting was over, Mikhail Ayvazyan and his friends leaped over to the dead pilot and found a man with officer badges and a solid flight jacket. The boys noticed one curious detail—the gun with which the airman had defended himself was not a standard TT pistol which Soviet pilots used to carry, but a German pistol. Little did the boys know that this once had belonged to Leutnant Heinz Froese, a fighter pilot from II./JG 77 whom Starshiy Leytenant Viktor Radkevich had shot down and captured in 1942.

For the dead Soviet airman was Viktor Radkevich, although this would not be clarified until 72 years later.

Russian journalist Olga Tolbatova, who has interviewed Mikhail Ayvazyan, wrote, "The Nazis continued to rob the dead pilot briskly. A photograph showing the officer with a

woman, apparently his wife, and child, fell out of the pocket of the pilot's tunic. Mikhail's mother asked the Fascists to give her the photo. The Germans probably didn't care, but amidst them there was a traitor in a Cossack uniform, and he ushered the woman with foul language and threatened to shoot her for her interest in the Red Army. The photo remained lying on the ground not far from the dead pilot. That same night, the nimble boys returned to bury the by then unidentified pilot."⁴¹

Viktor Radkevich's fate remained unclear until his shot down Spitfire was excavated in 2015, and in connection with that, his grave was detected, and the man could be identified.

While Radkevich fought his last battle on the ground, a very confused combat raged in the air above. The Spitfire pilots found themselves attacked not only by the Bf 109s, but also by Soviet Yak-1s. One of these made a gunnery pass against Leytenant Semyon Mironenko's "Spit." But Mironenko had been in action since November 1941, had flown around 200 combat missions and been credited with two victories, so he was able to evade the "friendly" attack.

These Yak-1s came from 812 IAP. Sixteen pilots from this regiment had also been dispatched to the Krymskaya area. They were divided into two groups of eight, and the group led by Kapitan Timofey Novikov clashed with what was reported as eighteen Bf 109s. In 812 IAP's unit chronicle, historians Antipov and Utkin write: "The Luftwaffe pilots managed not only to disrupt the coordination between the flights and pairs but also broke up pairs, breaking the fire coverage of the Yaks of each other."⁴²

Starshiy Serzhant Valentin Shirobokov's Yak-1 was hit and went into an uncontrolled dive. Judging by the German report, it appears as though it was first attacked by II./JG 3's Leutnant Wolf Ettl at 4,500 meters altitude, and then



This Spitfire Mk Vb of 57 GIAP was flown by the ace Leytenant Aleksandr Serebryakov of 57 GIAP. Serebryakov was a veteran who had flown in combat since November 1941. He survived the war with seventeen victories, achieved on 371 combat missions. The Soviets made their first acquaintance with Spitfires in March 1941, before the war, when an Air Force delegation was invited to Germany to make test flights on various captured Allied aircraft, including Spitfires. The Soviet test pilot Stepan Suprun was impressed by the performance of the Spitfire Mk I that he flew on this occasion, and as a result of this, the USSR started negotiations with the British to purchase Spitfires. The first Spitfires that were delivered to the Soviets arrived under Lend Lease conditions in September 1942. These were three Spitfire PR IV, unarmed photo-reconnaissance models which equipped the Northern Fleet. A total of 143 Spitfire Mk Vb were delivered to the Soviets via Iran in 1943. The first of these were handed over to 57 GIAP. In August 1943, the next regiment, 821 IAP, was equipped with Spitfire Mk Vb fighters. However, this aircraft failed to meet the expectations of VVS service. 57 GIAP was pulled out of combat in June 1943 and replaced its Spitfires with Airacobras. 821 IAP lost twenty Spitfire Mk Vb in slightly over a month, and soon also replaced its Spitfires with Airacobras.

APPENDIX III

Luftwaffe Aircraft Combat Losses on the Eastern Front April 1943 – July 1943

The following table is a compilation of available Luftwaffe unit loss records, mainly the daily loss reports to the Generalquartiermeister der Luftwaffe. It should be noted that most of these files are not one hundred percent complete. The actual Luftwaffe losses on the Eastern Front in the period below undoubtedly were higher than the figures below indicate. But it is clear that the majority of the aircraft combat losses of the Luftwaffe units below are included here.

The figures relate to aircraft totally lost or written off—damage degrees of 60 percent or higher, according to Luftwaffe terminology—due to either enemy activity or “unknown reasons.”

The first figure in each column relates to losses in the air, the second figure to losses on the ground.

The author would like to express his particular gratitude to historian Mr. Matti Salonen for his extensive assistance regarding much of the material below.

Unit	April 1943	May 1943	June 1943	July 1943	Totals	Grand totals
JG 3	9 - 0	8 - 2	6 - 0	31 - 0	54 - 2	56
JG 5	14 - 0	9 - 0	18 - 0	7 - 0	48 - 0	48
JG 26	0 - 0	1 - 0	1 - 0	v	3 - 0	3
JG 51	4 - 0	5 - 0	12 - 0	51 - 0	72 - 0	72
JG 52	6 - 2	26 - 0	12 - 0	35 - 0	79 - 2	81
JG 54	5 - 0	8 - 0	0 - 0	25 - 0	38 - 0	38
KG 1	4 - 0	7 - 0	9 - 0	11 - 0	31 - 0	31
KG 3	2 - 1	11 - 0	5 - 0	19 - 0	37 - 1	38
KG 4	5 - 0	8 - 3	5 - 1	12 - 0	30 - 4	34
KG 27	4 - 0	8 - 0	13 - 0	17 - 0	42 - 0	42
KG 30	1 - 0	2 - 0	0 - 0	1 - 0	4 - 0	4
KG 51	5 - 0	8 - 0	1 - 1	24 - 0	38 - 1	39
KG 53	2 - 0	4 - 0	2 - 0	13 - 0	21 - 0	21
KG 55	5 - 0	12 - 0	4 - 2	6 - 3	27 - 5	32
KG 100	1 - 0	4 - 0	1 - 0	5 - 0	11 - 0	11
StG 1	4 - 0	12 - 0	7 - 0	29 - 0	52 - 0	52
StG 2	9 - 1	12 - 0	8 - 0	30 - 0	59 - 0	59
StG 3	9 - 2	2 - 0	1 - 0	9 - 0	21 - 2	23
StG 5	2 - 0	4 - 0	5 - 0	1 - 0	12 - 0	12
StG 77	4 - 0	11 - 0	10 - 0	24 - 1	49 - 1	50
ZG 1	2 - 0	5 - 0	6 - 0	17 - 0	30 - 0	30
SchG 1	5 - 1	21 - 0	6 - 1	30 - 2	62 - 4	66
Störkampf units	1 - 12	1 - 1	0 - 1	6 - 0	8 - 13	21
Heeres-Aufkl. units	6 - 0	17 - 5	15 - 1	24 - 1	62 - 7	69
Fern-Aufkl. units	11 - 5	13 - 1	15 - 1	14 - 0	53 - 7	60
Ju 52 units	3 - 3	3 - 0	1 - 0	4 - 1	11 - 4	15
Totals	123 - 27	222 - 12	164 - 8	445 - 8	954 - 55	
Grand totals	150	234	172	453	1,009	

v = Not based on the Eastern Front.

APPENDIX IV

Aircraft Color Profiles by Jim Laurier

Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-4, as flown by Leutnant Adolf von Gordon of III./JG 3 from Kerch Airbase
on April 20, 1943.



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- 29 Ibid.
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- 32 TsAMO, f. 21922, op. 595175, d. 1, l. 5.
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