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LAST FLIGHT TO STALINGRAD

Written by **Graham Hurley**

Published By **Head of Zeus**

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First published in the UK in 2021 by Head of Zeus Ltd

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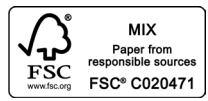
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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB) 9781788547543
ISBN (XTPB) 9781788547550
ISBN (E) 9781788547536



Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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London EC1R 4RG

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GRAMMATIKOVO, KERCH PENINSULA, CRIMEA, 20 MAY 1942

Oberstleutnant Georg Messner occasionally wondered whether he'd fallen in love with his boss.

Generaloberst Wolfram von Richthofen was the legendary chief of *Fliegerkorps VIII*. In half a decade he'd routed the Reich's enemies in Spain, Poland, France and the Balkans. His Stuka dive bombers, with the terrifying siren he'd invented himself, had become a battlefield code for instant annihilation, and even the vastness of the Soviet Union hadn't daunted him. On the day German armour poured into Russia, *Fliegerkorps VIII* had destroyed no less than 1,800 enemy aircraft for the loss of just two planes. Even hardened *Luftwaffe* veterans couldn't believe it.

Now, Messner – who served as an aide to *Generaloberst* Richthofen – was sitting in a draughty tent on a scruffy airfield on the Kerch Peninsula. The meeting had started barely half an hour ago. Messner had flown in last night, anticipating a celebration at the end of Operation *Trappenjagd*. General Manstein was rumoured to be arriving in time for lunch.

In ten exhausting days of incessant bombing, Richthofen's *Fliegerkorps VIII*, working hand in hand with General

Manstein's 11th Army, had kicked open the back door to the priceless Caucasian oilfields. One hundred and seventy thousand Russian soldiers stumbled off into captivity. Two full Soviet armies, plus the greater part of a third, were destroyed. In raid after raid, the Heinkels had seeded the Soviet formations below with the new SD2 fragmentation bombs, tiny eggs that exploded feet above the pale earth and tore men to pieces. Coupled with bigger ordnance, Richthofen called it 'giant fire magic'.

On the first Sunday of the campaign, most bomber pilots had flown nearly a dozen sorties. A handful had gone three better. Fifteen take-offs. Fifteen landings. All in one day. Unbelievable. This was the way Richthofen organised his campaigns: violence without end, ceaseless pressure, an unrelenting urge to grind the enemy to dust.

The results had been obvious from the air. Towards the end of the first week, personally supervising the carnage from two thousand metres, Richthofen had emerged from his tiny Fieseler Storch to tell Messner that the jaws of Manstein's trap were about to close around the hapless Slavs. 'Unless the weather stops us,' he growled, 'no Russian will leave the Crimea alive.'

And so it went. By the third week in May, after a difficult winter, the road to the Crimean fortress at Sevastopol lay open to Manstein's tanks and Richthofen's marauding bomber crews. After a victory of this magnitude, Germany was once again on course to advance deep into the Russian heartlands. Messner himself was a Berliner and it wasn't difficult to imagine the relief and rejoicing in his home city. Moscow and Leningrad were still under siege, but the real key surely lay here on the southern flank. The seizure of the oil wells would keep the Panzers rolling east. Grain from Ukraine would fill bellies

back home. Yet none of the euphoria Messner had expected was evident around this makeshift table.

Messner had first served under Richthofen half a decade ago in the Condor Legion, fighting the Republican armies in the mountains of northern Spain. He knew how difficult, how outspoken this man could be. He treated superiors and underlings alike with a rough impatience which brooked no excuse when things went wrong. His men feared him, of that there was no doubt, but he brought them comfort as well because he was – more often than not – right.

The story of war, as Messner knew all too well, was the story of things going wrong, but Richthofen had an implacable belief in willpower and the merits of meticulous organisation. In his view there was no such thing as defeat. There'd always be setbacks, certainly, occasions when plans threatened to fall apart, but the men under his command were expected to be masters of both themselves and the battlefield below. For Richthofen, the undisputed *Meister* of close air support, there was no sweeter word than *Schwerpunkt*, that carefully plotted moment when irresistible wrath descended on the heads of the enemy and put him on his knees.

Messner knew the faces around this table. Like him, they'd expected – at the very least – a word or two of appreciation for their collective efforts over the last ten exhausting days. *Fliegerkorps VIII* were rumoured to be Hitler's favourite *Luftwaffe* formation, a tribute no doubt to the sternness and brilliance of Richthofen's leadership, and as a result Richthofen had been awarded Oak Leaves to go with his *Ritterkreuz*. But now, in the aftermath of yet another triumph, he seemed anything but satisfied. How many medals did a man need,

Messner wondered. Just what kind of acknowledgement would slake his thirst to crush everything around him?

They were discussing the shape of the campaign over the coming days. No one doubted for a moment that the Soviets manning the fortress at Sevastopol would be the next to receive the attentions of *Fliegerkorps VIII*. This, the key to the Soviet position in the Crimea, was rumoured to be impregnable, a phrase for which Richthofen had no time at all. A priceless naval base. Cliffs falling sheer to the Black Sea. One hundred and six thousand Soviet front-line troops. Reinforced concrete fortifications. Strongpoints dug dozens of metres into the bedrock limestone. Artillery protected by twenty-five centimetres of armour plate. One by one, Richthofen tallied the Soviet boasts. Then, for the first time, he smiled.

'Operation *Storfang*,' he murmured. 'Remember what we did to Warsaw? *Storfang* will be all of that and more. No quarter, no letting up. We'll hit the Slavs until they beg for mercy. Think opera. *Trappenjagd* is just the overture. *Storfang* will have the audience on its feet.'

Trappenjagd meant 'Bustard Hunt'. *Storfang*, 'Sturgeon Catch'. There was an exchange of nods around the table. The war in Russia was still in its infancy. Nothing excited these men more than the prospect of another slaughter. From two thousand metres, regardless of what the Russian air force could muster, it would be a fresh chance to play God.

Richthofen briefly consulted a file that lay open in front of him. Six bomber groups flying in formations of twenty to thirty aircraft. Close support from Ju-87 Stukas dive-bombing Soviet formations. Rolling attacks, one following another. A torrent of high explosive falling on the luckless Ivans below.

A raised hand caught Richthofen's attention. The *Major* in charge of intelligence wanted to know about artillery support on the ground. The question sparked a brief frown from Richthofen.

'They're bringing up a Gustav *Dora*. It's showing off, of course, and completely unnecessary because we can finish the job ourselves, but it might give our Russian friends a fright or two.'

The image sparked a ripple of laughter around the table. The Gustav *Dora* was a monstrous piece of railway-mounted artillery. From a siding forty-seven kilometres away it could bombard a distant target with surprising accuracy and the thought of sharing a subterranean bunker with the thunderous arrival of a seven-tonne shell would do nothing for the Ivans' peace of mind.

'Questions?'

The Bavarian engineer responsible for maintenance wanted to know about the spares situation. After *Trappenjagd*, engines on the Heinkels badly needed servicing before an operation of this magnitude. Another officer at the table had concerns about supplies of aviation fuel. To both questions Richthofen grunted monosyllabic replies, scribbling notes to himself on the pad at his elbow. He seemed indifferent to the smaller courtesies of a meeting such as this but by now these men knew that both matters would be resolved. That was the way Richthofen liked to operate. Decisions taken in a matter of seconds. Action guaranteed.

He glanced up from his pad as a figure appeared at the mouth of the tent. Messner recognised the adjutant who'd been with Richthofen since the early days in Spain. He paused beside the table and handed over a single sheet of paper torn from a

message form. Richthofen scanned it quickly, nodded. Then he looked up again and brought the meeting to a close before beckoning Messner to accompany him to the nearby hut he was using as his makeshift headquarters.

Messner settled himself in the only other chair with intact legs, doing his best to avoid the draught through the ill-fitting door, and waited while Richthofen attended to a number of telephone calls.

He'd first caught the *Generaloberst*'s eye back in the days when he was assigned to the Führer's special squadron. Messner's task was to ferry Nazi chieftains around the Reich and from time to time the passenger manifest had included the flyer who'd turned *Fliegerkorps VIII* into a legend. Richthofen, cousin of the great Red Baron, knew a good pilot when he saw one and had – as it turned out – made a note of Messner's name. Aside from his skills in the air, he liked the way Messner handled himself: unshowy, highly organised, with little time for small talk. In short, Richthofen's sort of man.

Then had come the accident, and the weeks of surgery, and the months of slow recovery, and Messner's days in the Führer's cockpit were over. With his mutilated face and a deep chill where his heart had once been, he'd emerged from convalescence a different man. His wife had left him for his best friend. His only daughter had become a stranger. He had no one he could truly call close.

But none of this meant anything as far as Richthofen was concerned. Messner was still a fine pilot. Richthofen demanded an aide's undivided loyalty – total dedication – and in this respect he was never disappointed. Over the last year or so, he'd become Richthofen's eyes and ears as *Fliegerkorps VIII* pushed

east, and his growing reputation as the *Generaloberst*'s snitch barely registered. Recently, in a gruff gesture of thanks for all his work, Richthofen had secured his tireless aide a promotion. *Oberstleutnant* Messner had yet to spare the time to celebrate.

The last phone call had come to an end. Richthofen produced the sheet of paper and put it carefully to one side.

'Your days in the *Reichsregierung*,' he said. 'You flew our Leader on countless occasions. What did you make of him?'

Messner frowned. Questions like these were rare. Richthofen rarely troubled himself with other people's opinions.

'Well?' Richthofen never bothered to hide his impatience.

'The Führer is a man you'd treat with a great deal of respect.'

'You think he's clever?'

'Very.'

'Ruthless?'

'Yes.'

'Did you ever trust him?'

'Of course not. But that didn't matter.'

'Why not?'

'Because I was the one at the controls.'

Messner's answer drew a nod of approval. Then Richthofen glanced at the message on the desk.

'Read it.'

Messner picked it up. It appeared to be confirmation that the *Generaloberst*'s personal Storch would be readied for take-off by first light tomorrow. He always flew it alone, shuttling from one forward airfield to another, urging his commanders to yet greater efforts. On this occasion, an extra fuel tank had been fitted.

Messner looked up. 'Somewhere special?'

'Berlin.'

'Am I allowed to ask why?'

'Of course. Our Leader wants a conversation tomorrow night. It's a long way to go for a shit meal but let's hope he makes it worthwhile. Something else, Herr *Oberstleutnant*.'

'Sir?'

'Goebbels' film people are still at work. I'd take the latest footage to Berlin myself but they say they need an extra day. These pictures will do us nothing but good. Can you sort this out, Messner? Make sure the film is in the right hands as soon as possible?'