

Suspicious Mission

The exploits conducted at Bletchley Park in England and the code breaking of Enigma by the Allies are well documented. In the Pacific Theater the successful breaking of the Japanese code by the U.S. Navy, which had such a profound effect on the outcome of the Battle of Midway must be considered one of the greatest intelligence coups of the war. But what of the counter strokes by the Axis against the Allies, specifically the activities of the U.S. Army Air Force in Europe?

In the course of my reading a German History of Pk As, JG-53, by J. Prien, quite by accident I discovered some information which caused me to wonder if the U.S. Army Air Force operational mission planning information had been routinely compromised during the war. I came by the information quite unexpectedly - I was reading the history for a completely unrelated reason.

In 1944 I was flying the P-51 Mustang with the 31st Fighter group, stationed in Italy and flying long range heavy bomber escort for the B-17's and B-24's of the 15th Air Force. On one particular mission to Ploesti, I had the misfortune of shooting down a ME-109 and watching the pilot, who had bailed out, fall to his death when his parachute failed to open. Forty five years later I began an inquiry into the identity of my victim. Through a series of contacts, I learned that his name was Herbert Franke and he flew with I/JG 53. In order to learn more about him, I purchased the three-volume history of the Geschwader and laboriously began to translate it. It was during this tedious reading that I came upon a passage that immediately caught my attention. It read as follows:

22 August 1944: With 530 four-motor bombers the US 15th Air Force attacked from the south, the synthetic oil works of Blechhammer and Odertal, accompanied by numerous P-51's. Already on the morning of the 21 August 1944 had parts of the III. /JG 53 been transferred from Mortitz to Stubendorf near Vienna; the remainder of the group followed on the morning of the 22 and landed around 09 o'clock 45 in Stubendorf. At 10.00 o'clock there was an alarm, as the approach was announced of the four-motors from the south, and shortly thereafter the group took off, which, a short time later got into an air fight with the escorting P-51's. It appears as if the dogfight remained without result, since on one hand no losses were announced, on other side nothing is known about any shootdowns. After a two-hour mission the group landed at 12.00 o'clock in Brunn.

Hardly was the defense employment finished in the south-east, when the group was transferred suddenly in a north west direction - in the flight book of Martin von Vacano is recorded:

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15.30 - 16.40 o'clock Overflight Brunn - Mortitz

19.00 - 20.20 o'clock Overflight Mortitz - Leeuwarden

There was a very good reason why the German fighters did not make contact with the bomber stream that day. I was leading the 31st Fighter Group on that mission and was shocked when I arrived at the prescribed bomber rendezvous point over Hungary, near Lake Balaton and found the sky completely empty of any bombers. I was reasonably sure that the bombers were behind rather than ahead so I had to wait. Unbeknownst to me, the bombers had encountered jet stream type head winds and were forty-five minutes late. Trying to keep 48 Mustangs in the same piece of sky was no easy matter, and the difficulty was further compounded by the fact that part of the group which was out farthest to the west, toward Vienna, were engaged by a formation of Me-109's. My guess is that the German ground controllers mistook our large fighter formation on radar for the bombers and scrambled their fighters from Vienna too early. They would have had to land for fuel just as the bombers were passing on their route north. The remainder of our Group finally made rendezvous with the bombers and escorted them to the target and as far back as remaining fuel allowed. We were engaged in the vicinity of Blechhammer, but probably by a different Geschwader.

Why would a formation of interceptors be ordered to fly from their home base 275 miles southeastward for a one-day temporary stay, in the face of a critical shortage of aviation fuel at this time? Part of the group flew over on the 21st of August; the remainder arrived on the morning of the 22nd, only a short time before the alarm was sounded that enemy bombers were approaching. Was it coincidence that their temporary operating base was astride the route of the 15th Air Force heavy bomber formation, which was scheduled to attack targets in what is today, southern Poland? And why would the temporary relocation be abruptly terminated on the same day and the German fighters sent back to their home base? The inescapable conclusion is that the German fighter force was deployed for a specific reason. Luftwaffe Headquarters must have known beforehand that on the 22nd of August 1944, the scheduled target for the 15th AF was Blechhammer. Of itself that is not particularly surprising - there were rumors circulating even then among the group pilots that a German cadre had been left behind on the Gargano promontory which was equipped with a transmitter. From this location and height, almost the entire complex of fighter and bomber bases in the Foggia area could be kept under surveillance. From the times of take off of the bombers and their general direction after setting course, a good guess could be made of their intended target, but the forewarning would be limited to a few hours. This was something quite different. On this occasion, the information was available at least the day before.

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Typically our group received the mission orders from 15th AF by secure teletype around midnight on the day of the mission. Even assuming that somehow the German Intelligence had penetrated the communication network; it still would not be soon enough to explain the departure of part of the intercepting fighters the day before the mission.

Who had access to this information at such an early stage? Was it transmitted in code to Mediterranean Air Force Headquarters or to England? Had the Germans actually succeeded in placing an agent in some position high enough to have this type of information? I don't know. Perhaps some future military historian will be able to solve this mystery. More likely it will remain an Enigma, like most other WWII intelligence activities.