

## Von Richthofen's 'Giant fire-magic': The *Luftwaffe's* Contribution to the Battle of Kerch, 1942

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Adolf Hitler's directive for the 1942 summer campaign in the east clearly reflects the unfinished nature of the previous year's campaign. Although the *Führer* claimed to Mussolini on 30 April 1942 that, with the exception of just a few 'blemishes which will shortly be eradicated, ... the Crimea finds itself in our hands,' the reality was very different.<sup>1</sup> In April 1942 the Crimea was neither firmly nor entirely in German hands, as Hitler well knew. It was certainly not the 'bastion in the Black Sea' that he described to his Italian counterpart. On the contrary, powerful Soviet forces still held both Sevastopol, the Soviet Union's main naval base and shipyard in the Black Sea, and the strategically important Kerch Peninsula, which Hitler planned to use as a springboard to the Caucasus. Therefore, he stated in his directive for the 1942 summer campaign, before the major offensive into the Caucasus could commence it would be necessary 'to clear up the Kerch Peninsula in the Crimea and to bring about the fall of Sevastopol.'<sup>2</sup>

In May and June, the powerful Eleventh Army, commanded by *Generaloberst* Erich von Manstein, reputed to be Hitler's best operational army commander, launched strong attacks on the Soviet forces at each end of the Crimea. These attacks proved stunningly successful, destroying the enemy and finally giving Hitler total mastery of the Crimea. Von Manstein's Kerch offensive, codenamed Operation *Trappenjagd* (Bustard Hunt), and his assault on Sevastopol, codenamed Operation *Störfang* (Sturgeon Catch), deserve their prominent place in historical works on the Eastern campaigns. Skillfully guided by von Manstein, Eleventh Army defeated numerically-

superior and better-situated forces quickly and, especially during the Kerch offensive, with relatively few losses. However, the role of the *Luftwaffe*, which performed superbly as it provided the army with an unprecedented level of tactical air support, has been poorly covered by historians of these events, whose works focus primarily on army operations and von Manstein's much-touted tactical genius. Describing and explaining *Luftwaffe* operations during *Trappenjagd*, the first of the two Crimean campaigns of 1942, this study attempts to correct that imbalance. Eleventh Army, it argues, would not have succeeded were it not for the outstanding efforts of *Luftwaffe* forces, led by a commander of equal genius.

### **Manstein, Kerch, Hitler and the *Luftwaffe***

In mid-April 1942, von Manstein grimly realized that the destruction of enemy forces on the Kerch Peninsula would be extremely difficult with the forces likely to be at his disposal. Aerial reconnaissance revealed that they substantially outnumbered his own. 'At the end of April,' he wrote in his memoirs, 'they had seventeen rifle divisions, three rifle brigades, two cavalry divisions and four tank brigades – a total of twenty-six large formations.'<sup>3</sup> Von Manstein's account, detailed as it is, actually fails to reveal clearly the awesome strength of the three armies formed by those formations: the 44th, 47th and 51st. For instance, he scarcely mentioned their defenses, logistics system and state of combat readiness and totally ignored the participation of 47th Army (perhaps because only half of it was ever used against his own force), even though as many as 40,000 of its men were deployed on the Kerch Peninsula.<sup>4</sup>

The Soviet Command had more troops on that peninsula than it could conveniently deploy in its confines. The front itself, stretching along the line of the Ak Monai positions, measured only 18 kilometers in width, yet behind it waited no fewer than 210,000 well-equipped troops.<sup>5</sup> This led in some sectors to what even a Red Army General Staff report called 'an unacceptable density of forces'.<sup>6</sup> The 51st Army, for example, crammed nine full divisions in and behind the northern part of the front which, after recent gains, now protruded westward. This narrow sector measured less than six kilometers across.<sup>7</sup> This means that there were more than seventeen soldiers to every metre of front. On the other hand, the huge amount of available manpower on the peninsula – the same report notes that both the front and army rear areas were 'saturated' with reserves – allowed the Soviet Command to stage a defense in massive depth. At least theoretically, this defense would increase in strength further east where the peninsula widened to as much as 50 kilometers, allowing troops to be used far more effectively than in the congested narrows of the isthmus.<sup>8</sup> To reach the ports

of Kerch and Kamysh-Burun, situated on the Kerch Straits 75 kilometers behind the front, the Germans would have to bulldoze through three carefully prepared defensive lines: the Parpach Line, extending across the isthmus at its narrowest point; the Nasyr Line, running parallel to it 8 kilometers to the east; and the Sultanovka Line, stretching across the peninsula at one of its broadest points 30 kilometers in front of Kerch.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Sultanovka Line (the so-called 'Turkish Wall' that followed the remains of ancient fortifications) was formidable, the Parpach Line surpassed it in strength. This had a 10-meter-wide and 5-meter-deep anti-tank ditch, first built in 1941 but substantially expanded by Soviet engineers after amphibious landings in mid-winter. Behind it lay wide minefields and barriers of barbed wire, and further back countless 'Spanish horsemen' (huge iron hedgehogs of welded-together railway tracks) protected concrete bunkers, artillery positions and machine-gun posts.<sup>10</sup>

Because the sea on either side of the Parpach Line excluded the possibility of outflanking maneuvers, von Manstein accepted that his main attack would have to be frontal. He also knew, however, that the forces at his disposal – five German infantry divisions and 22nd Panzer Division, augmented by two Romanian divisions and a brigade – would be outnumbered by almost three to one and, therefore, that a purely frontal assault was unlikely to achieve anything. He racked his brain for an alternative plan, one that would allow his troops not only to break through the strong Parpach defenses but also to destroy the main bulk, or at least a substantial part, of the enemy formations in the process of the first breakthrough.

There was, von Manstein concluded, only one possibility. During recent attacks the enemy had managed to extend his front in the northern sector of the narrow front by around seven kilometers. The Soviet Command was gravely aware that this protruding section was highly vulnerable, especially after a recent failed attempt by 22nd Panzer Division to stab into the base of the small salient and destroy the cut-off forces. As a result of these heightened fears, the Soviet Command significantly reinforced the bulge. This explains why 51st Army was so densely packed there. The German general learned from ground and air reconnaissance that 'the Soviets had massed two-thirds of their troops (both front-line and reserve) in and behind this northern sector alone. In the southern sector they deployed only three divisions in the line and two or three in reserve.'<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, he devised a plan which would see his troops, strongly supported by the *Luftwaffe*, burst through the Parpach Line 'not in the protruding enemy sector, but down in the southern sector along the coast of the Black Sea; that is, where they least expected it.'<sup>12</sup> After four or five kilometers these forces – two infantry divisions and 22nd Panzer Division – would be through the main

line. They would then wheel north and drive into the rear of the Soviet divisions concentrated in and behind the bulge, cutting off and eventually destroying them. While this took place, other Axis forces would advance rapidly towards Kerch, thereby protecting the eastern flank of those encircling the 'pocket' and preventing the enemy in the rear from organizing any counter-offensive operations.

On 31 March, von Manstein issued a preliminary directive for the operation. He remained acutely aware of the huge risks involved, and two days later told both the *OKH* and *Generalfeldmarschall* Fedor von Bock, commander of Army Group South, that he still considered the discrepancy in forces too great.<sup>13</sup> Von Bock replied that, whilst the *OKH* might make another division or two available late in May, the operation should commence as soon as possible to prevent the Soviets themselves seizing the initiative in the meantime. On 16 April, von Manstein took his *Trappenjagd* plan to Hitler, who approved everything except for the *Luftwaffe* dispositions. He would see to them himself.<sup>14</sup>

The *Führer* was by inclination and experience an 'army man' who, despite his superb grasp of technical details, lacked experience in air tactics and strategy.<sup>15</sup> During the successful first years of the war he had rarely meddled in air force affairs. He was content to leave most decisions to *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring, the *Luftwaffe*'s ineffectual Commander-in-Chief, and *Generalfeldmarschall* Erhard Milch, the latter's capable and dedicated deputy. Over the winter of 1941–42, however, the *Führer* came to appreciate the key role played by air support. In numerous places along the Eastern Front he had seen the *Luftwaffe* patch up frontline difficulties, sometimes even significantly affecting the outcome of battles. Clearly impressed, he began to interfere in air matters, often without consulting Göring. Late in February, to illustrate this point, *Generaloberst* Georg von Kuchler, commander of Army Group North, had laid plans for a counter-attack near Volkhov in the far north. On 2 March, Hitler personally ordered a 'thorough air preparation of several days' before the opening of the attack.<sup>16</sup> The weather was so unfavourable, however, that few aircraft could take to the air. Consequently, the *Führer* expressly ordered von Kuchler, who was anxious to get underway, to postpone the offensive 'until weather conditions permit the full deployment of the Air Force'.<sup>17</sup> A month later he lectured him on the importance of close air support. Back in January, he said, Toropets would not have been lost, and with it key German fuel dumps and supply depots, if the group commander had fully understood the potential of this support.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps with this 'failure' in mind, Hitler decided to organize the deployment of air units for the important Kerch offensive himself.

That offensive, he had stated late in February, demanded 'massed airpower'.<sup>19</sup> On 17 April he held a lengthy conference with his air staff to

work out the nature and level of this 'massed airpower'.<sup>20</sup> Until he could discuss the situation with *Generaloberst* Wolfram von Richthofen, whose powerful *Fliegerkorps VIII*<sup>1</sup> he planned to use in the Crimea alongside Alexander *Generaloberst* Löh's *Luftflotte 4*,<sup>22</sup> Hitler initially dealt only with the dispositions of Löh's air fleet. Many of his instructions to the Air Staff dealt with the attack on Sevastopol, and need no elaboration here, but many dealt specifically with the assault on Kerch. In particular, he instructed Löh's fleet to report immediately on the current availability of flak units before Sevastopol and the Kerch front, and whether these units could be strengthened before each attack commenced. Acutely aware that Romanian troops had, as von Manstein later complained, 'limited usefulness in an offensive role',<sup>23</sup> Hitler also ordered *Luftflotte 4* to pay special attention to 18th Romanian Division's sector and to 'rebut with strong air support' any attacks made against it from Sevastopol.

If the Kerch campaign were to succeed, Hitler emphasized, it was absolutely necessary to cut off Soviet forces from their supplies. *Luftflotte 4*, therefore, must note that:

During the period until the attack itself begins, the supply of the Kerch Peninsula must be interrupted in the strongest manner. Because of the short travel time of the ships between Novorossiisk and Kerch, it will often be impossible to attack them at sea. The point of main effort [*Schwerpunkt*] of the fight against supplies will therefore be the harbors of Kerch and Kamysh-Burun as well as Novorossiisk and Tuapse.

Despite this energetic fight against supplies to the Kerch Peninsula, he added, the operational readiness of the units of *Luftflotte 4* must be further increased. To enhance the air fleet's offensive capabilities, Göring, as *Luftwaffe* Commander-in-Chief, would give it an extra bomber wing (the 55th) and supply enough new aircraft to bring the fleet up to full strength. To boost the number of airmen for the operation (and especially for the Heinkel 111 units, the back-bone of the bomber force), *Luftflotte 4* would have to employ personnel from the training group attached to each wing. Even pilots from those groups who could not yet fly by instruments alone would be used during periods of good weather, supervised by older and more experienced flight leaders.

New airfields on the Crimea must immediately be created and supplied, Hitler demanded, so that the approach flights – not only of the fighters and Stukas, but also of most bombers – could be kept as short as possible and the number of operations increased. If the supply of those airfields by road and rail could not be achieved in time for the attack then air transport must be used. Should this situation arise, *Luftflotte 4* must request assistance from

the Quartermaster General of the Air Force. The air fleet itself and not the army, Hitler stressed, was responsible for the protection of its airfields.

The *Führer* placed great emphasis on the employment of the deadly and effective SD2 fragmentation bombs, developed during the previous year specifically for use in the east. These small 2kg bombs – christened ‘Devil’s eggs’ by aircrew – fragmented into between 50 and 250 pieces of shrapnel, which sprayed out in a five-meter radius. Large numbers could be dropped at once, and detonated on impact or just above the ground with devastating effects on troop concentrations. SD2s, Hitler explained, ‘are best used against living targets. A satisfactory result can only be achieved when the bombs are used against crowds.’ The equipping of *Luftflotte 4* bomber units with these bombs was to be speeded up. Regardless of whether the production goal was reached or not, he added, it was essential that the special canisters they needed (of which around 6,000 were supposed to be available by the end of April) would be delivered immediately to that air fleet. The supply of the bombs themselves must be regulated so that no shortages could possibly occur. To determine how many were needed, planners were to base their calculations on the assumption that the campaign against the Kerch Peninsula would take 14 days.

Hitler knew that the Parpach Line would be extremely hard to break through. Soviet artillery batteries and other installations, he therefore insisted, were ‘to be hit with the heaviest available bombs. The air fleet must also ascertain whether it is possible, by using the heaviest bombs, to create a safe path for German tanks across the massive enemy anti-tank ditches.’ Göring must fully strengthen *Luftflotte 4* in time for the attack against the Kerch Peninsula. Whilst the air fleet in general was to be strengthened, the heaviest possible concentration of airpower for the capture of Kerch was to be obtained. The Kerch campaign was so critical, he stressed, that once it got underway the other sectors of the front in the southern zone would even have to go without air support. The only exception permitted, Hitler concluded, would be the defense of troops attacked from Sevastopol.

One historian claims that shortly after this conference ‘the potential for concentrating German air power in the Crimea increased dramatically. Richthofen, who interceded personally with Hitler, convinced the *Führer* of the need to employ *Fliegerkorps VIII* in the operation.’<sup>24</sup> *Generaloberst* Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen certainly did meet Hitler at this time, and his powerful close air support force was subsequently sent to the Crimea to support *Luftflotte 4*’s attacks on Kerch and Sevastopol. But even a cursory reading of von Richthofen’s personal diary for April reveals that the decision to send him to the Crimea was made in his absence and without his prior knowledge by Hitler and *Generaloberst* Hans Jeschonnek, the

*Luftwaffe* Chief of Staff. 'Arrived in Lüneburg on 12 April for a four-week holiday', von Richthofen penned on 18 April. 'At last! But on 18 April, while entertaining guests, received a phone call from Jeschonnek: By order of the *Führer*, I must immediately leave again, to work at Kerch. Get there quickly, get everything started! Then I can again take a few days off. Formal orders still to come. No use complaining.'<sup>25</sup> The following day he flew to Berlin in a Fieseler Fi-156 Storch and, in Jeschonnek's company, rang Hitler from the Air Ministry. 'The *Führer*', he wrote that night, 'insisted in a very respectful manner that I should take part at Kerch, because I'm the only person who can do the job.' The risk of failure, Hitler emphasized, 'must be minimized, because the first blow struck this year must be successful'.<sup>26</sup>

Hitler clearly thought that the transfer to the Crimea of von Richthofen's *Fliegerkorps VIII*, a specialized close support force with an unparalleled combat record since 1939, would guarantee that his 'first blow' against the Soviets in 1942 would be a success. His decision to send von Richthofen also shows how important he considered the offensive to be. Von Richthofen was an arrogant and aggressive man (whose diary entries are full of harsh and often unfair criticisms of both superiors and subordinates), but he was an extraordinarily successful and influential tactical air commander. He was, as one historian wrote, 'certainly one of the best tacticians in the history of air warfare'.<sup>27</sup>

### **Wolfram von Richthofen and Fliegerkorps VIII**

Von Richthofen was born into an aristocratic family at Barzdorf, Silesia, on 10 October 1895.<sup>28</sup> As a young ensign, he served in the 4th Hussar Regiment from March 1913 until September 1917. He then transferred to the Imperial Air Service, eventually joining the famous Richthofen Squadron, whose first commander had been his cousin Manfred, the legendary 'Red Baron'. Wolfram scored 8 victories in all. After the war he studied engineering, eventually gaining a doctorate. He resumed his military career in November 1923, and throughout the 1920s his *Reichswehr* service included time in the cavalry, infantry and artillery. From April 1929 to October 1932 he served as air attaché in the German Embassy in Rome, where he befriended Italo Balbo, the Fascist hero and Italian Minister of Aviation.

In October 1933, von Richthofen joined the fledgling Reich Air Ministry, which evolved into the *Luftwaffe* two years later. In 1936 he served as Chief of Staff to both *Generalmajor* Hugo Sperrle and his successor, *Generalmajor* Helmuth Volkmann, commanders of the 'Condor Legion' which earned fame (and infamy, after the bombing of Guernica) during the Spanish Civil War. In November 1938, promoted to

*Generalmajor* himself, he became the final commander of that unit. During the Spanish War he experimented with close air support tactics and aircraft (including a few early Junkers 87 Stukas) and, no doubt influenced by his experiences as both a soldier and pilot during the Great War, developed tactics and a ground-air liaison system improving air support effectiveness. Also, his experiences in Spain removed his earlier doubts about the dive-bomber. Realizing that the dive-bomber was far more accurate than current horizontal bombers – and, therefore, more useful for tactical purposes – he returned to Germany as one of its advocates.

Because of his outstanding successes in Spain and his competence in the use of the dive-bomber and new methods of tactical air employment, which had a significant effect on German air planners, von Richthofen was soon hailed as the *Luftwaffe's* expert in this field. In July 1939, he formed a special close support force (*Fliegerführer z.b.V.*), which quickly expanded into the powerful *Fliegerkorps VIII*. Under his command, this specialized ground attack corps distinguished itself in Poland and France by its excellent support of advancing Panzer spearheads (for which he won the Knight's Cross and promotion to *General der Flieger*).

His sluggish Stukas, on the other hand, proved so vulnerable to enemy fighters in regions where air superiority had not been attained that he was compelled to provide fighter escorts. Even so, they were severely mauled by British fighters during the Battle of Britain, forcing the air fleet commanders hastily to withdraw them. However, von Richthofen's corps provided exemplary close support in the absence of enemy fighters during the Balkans campaign and the airborne invasion of Crete. Enjoying the luxury of almost total air superiority, his Stukas inflicted heavy losses on Allied troops, transports and shipping. For his dynamic leadership he was awarded Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross.

Von Richthofen's air corps won further laurels in the Eastern campaign, especially during the height of the winter crisis when, operating by itself after the transfer of Kesselring's units, its support of the army in the critical central zone before Moscow was outstanding. In recognition of these achievements, he was promoted to *Generaloberst* on 1 February 1942. This was a unique honour for an air corps commander; he now had the same rank as the air fleet commanders and the most senior *Luftwaffe* staff officers, such as Jeschonnek and the late Udet.

In preparation for the major summer campaign of 1942, the various units of *Fliegerkorps VIII* had been sent in early April back to their home bases in the Reich for rehabilitation. The rebuilding of the badly-battered units was still in progress when von Richthofen flew to *Luftflotte 4's* headquarters in Nikolayev on 21 April, accompanied by his good friend, Jeschonnek. The latter explained that von Richthofen's refitted corps, when it finally arrived



in the region, would work in close cooperation with *Luftflotte 4*. However, contrary to the previous custom of placing all corps under the control of the fleet in the region, von Richthofen's would not be placed under *Luftflotte 4*'s authority. *Fliegerkorps VIII*, under von Richthofen's command at all times, would actually take charge of air operations during the offensive and answer only to Göring.<sup>29</sup> It would also provide the lion's share of the army's close support.

This greatly offended the honour of *Luftflotte 4*'s senior officers, especially *General der Flieger* Günther Korten, the air fleet's Chief of Staff. Korten, an intuitive and talented officer who later succeeded Jeschonnek as *Luftwaffe* Chief of Staff, demanded that he lead the air units himself.<sup>30</sup> This demand fell on deaf ears, to the indignation of his colleagues. They were, von Richthofen recorded in his diary, 'deeply peeved and viewed my arrival with considerable mistrust'.<sup>31</sup> His criticisms of their 'not very convincing preparations' for the offensive only made things worse. Eating in the officers' mess, he sarcastically wrote, 'was like sitting in a house with a corpse ... In the evening the fleet drowned its grief in alcohol'.

The following day he flew to the Crimea in order to talk with local air commanders. He was not impressed by how apathetic they appeared and, to their distaste ('they pull stupid faces'), angrily informed them that they 'must be woken from their winter sleep'.<sup>32</sup> He also had a lengthy meeting with von Manstein. This conference went surprisingly well, despite the potential for a major ego clash between these two brilliant but conceited personalities. 'Manstein was surprisingly mellow and accommodating', the air commander jotted that evening. 'He understood everything. It was extremely uplifting.' On many other occasions he described his army counterpart in similarly glowing terms. The respect was clearly mutual. 'Baron von Richthofen', the army general later recalled, 'was certainly the most outstanding air force leader we had in World War II.'<sup>33</sup> 'He made great demands on his units', von Manstein continued,

but always went up [in an aircraft] himself to oversee important attacks. Moreover, one was always meeting him at the front, where he would visit even the most advanced units to get a clear picture of the possibilities of providing air support for army operations. Our cooperation, both at Eleventh Army and later at Army Groups South and Don, was always excellent.

The partnership of these men, two of the most talented operational commanders of the Second World War, was probably unrivalled during that great conflict. The spectre of petty rivalry revealed itself extremely rarely, and even then it appeared only in the pages of their private diaries. There were no public squabbles or instances of major strategic or tactical

dissension. This cannot be said for the professional relationships of many top Allied field commanders, where ego clashes and strategic differences often caused significant problems (the case of Montgomery and Patton in the Mediterranean and in northwestern Europe springs to mind). One has to search hard for evidence that the two Germans operated in anything but total unison. On 28 April, to show how insignificant the exceptions are, von Richthofen recorded in his diary that he felt snubbed that day by his partner: 'Waited for *Generalfeldmarschall* von Bock [commander of Army Group South]. Said "Guten Tag" to him, after which Manstein apparently tried to prevent me meeting further with him.'<sup>34</sup> Despite feeling annoyed, von Richthofen said and did nothing to inflame the situation, but a few days later took great delight in beating von Manstein in a debate over tactical differences in front of 30th Army Corps' command. 'Victory!', he jubilantly penned that night, 'It's pathetic to say, but I'm "top general"!'<sup>35</sup>

In close consultation, they meticulously coordinated their operations and created joint *Schwerpunkte* (points of main effort). Von Manstein knew that his own forces were numerically weak and would, therefore, require the best possible air support. Poor communications could prove disastrous, so he stressed the need for effective liaison between ground and air forces. Orders from 30th Army Corps, for example, which doubtless originated from him, instructed its staff to deal directly with *Fliegerkorps VIII* rather than proceed through normal air fleet channels as in past campaigns.<sup>36</sup>

Von Richthofen's main task in this period was to ensure that all air preparations for the attack were going according to plan. When he arrived back in Nikolayev on 27 April, the day before his command staff arrived in the Crimea and three days before he assumed formal command, he was very disappointed by *Luftflotte 4*'s preparations for the offensive, due to commence on 5 May. While having coffee with Alexander Löhr, the Austrian-born air fleet commander, he lectured his own senior officers about their poor preparation efforts. 'They were', he recorded that evening, 'extremely inferior'. This was apparently not a popular message, as revealed by his next comment: 'Some friction and difficulties'.<sup>37</sup>

During this time, von Richthofen travelled constantly from base to base in his light Storch aircraft, which often came under enemy fire and occasionally had to make forced landings. He took these risks in order personally to brief his wing and group commanders and flak battalion leaders, and to exhort them to speed up their preparations. Believing that commanders are only as good as the men they command, on many occasions he addressed not only officers, but also large groups of assembled troops. His efforts bore fruit; by the time *Trappenjagd* commenced on 8 May, the strength, state of readiness and morale of most units under his command had risen to an excellent level.

Having said that, von Richthofen's concerns about the operational readiness of local air units were exacerbated in the days before the offensive got underway by the slow arrival of other units returning from rehabilitation in the west. 'Two fighter groups and a ground-attack wing', he complained in his diary on 2 May, 'are stranded in Silesia because of bad weather. They were supposed to have arrived today in *Luftflotte 4*'s sector.'<sup>38</sup> He was clearly unhappy, and asked Jeschonnek whether the campaign should be postponed until they arrived. He also discussed the situation with von Manstein, who agreed to postpone it for two days (that is, until 7 May).<sup>39</sup> The army leader was well aware that the success of *Trappenjagd* depended on the strongest possible air support. It is a ground operation, he explained to his corps and division commanders that day, but 'its main effort is in the air'. Aircraft would have to 'pull the infantry forward'.<sup>40</sup> Only the day before, he had enthusiastically stated that the operation would have 'concentrated air support the like of which has never existed'.<sup>41</sup> On 4 May, however, von Richthofen was forced to postpone the operation a further day because enemy air attacks on forward airfields prevented him positioning his fighters close to the front.<sup>42</sup> When the missing ground-attack wing turned up in Nikolayev the following day, without the two fighter groups, which were then in Romania and Bulgaria, he wanted to postpone it again. However, after consulting weather reports, which predicted good weather on the scheduled start date, and learning that the groups were on their way (they actually arrived the following day), he decided against delaying the attack. It would go ahead, as arranged, on 8 May.

Von Richthofen realized that he had a remarkably strong force at his disposal, comprising no fewer than 11 bomber, 3 dive-bomber and 7 fighter *Gruppen*. Despite constantly grumbling about the general state of preparations, he never doubted that *Trappenjagd* would be successful and that his air units would play a decisive role. 'I actually have the impression,' he wrote in his diary after inspecting the front on 28 April, 'that, compared to the middle front, the battle here will be very light and easily accomplished at no great cost.' Repeating himself, he closed his entry that night with the words: 'I believe the battle *will* be very easy.'<sup>43</sup> That evening, von Bock recorded in his own diary his feelings about the offensive. He was far less optimistic. Whilst he was impressed by the army's 'careful preparations' for the attack, he still worried about the 'extraordinary risk' it entailed.<sup>44</sup> His anxiety grew as the launch date approached. He was especially concerned about the enemy's defensive depth and, on 5 May, even proposed giving up the wheel to the north.<sup>45</sup> Von Manstein insisted that this crucial northward turn was the only way of destroying the bulk of Soviet forces in the first breakthrough. The army group commander relented, and allowed the operation to go ahead as planned.

In recent days, von Manstein had done everything possible to convince the Soviets that he was going to attack in the northern sector and that they should continue to mass troops there. Radio messages meant for the enemy's listening posts were sent, deceptive reconnaissance missions and troop movements were undertaken, and false artillery positions were constructed.<sup>46</sup> He also recruited von Richthofen's units, which pounded the enemy in the northern sector, inflicting heavy losses and depressing Soviet morale. The air commander was keen to help von Manstein, seeing these deception operations as excellent opportunities to test his units' combat capabilities. He was clearly pleased with the result. 'Giant fire-magic!', he wrote after witnessing a bombardment on the eve of the attack, 'The infantry should see what we have to offer. It would increase their courage.'<sup>47</sup> He had actually tried a week earlier to deploy his aircraft in a diversionary attack, believing it would deceive the enemy, put his units through their paces, and raise morale.<sup>48</sup> On that occasion, however, he was unable to persuade von Manstein, who quickly quashed the idea, arguing that it would divide available air assets and, with more than a week to go until the start date, forfeit the advantage of surprise.<sup>49</sup>

### **Operations by Fliegerkorps IV and Fliegerführer Süd April–May 1942**

Before we analyze the battle itself, which began in the early hours of 8 May, it is necessary to describe and briefly explain the *Luftwaffe's* recent activities in the region. After all, during the operation's planning stages in the first weeks of April and before von Richthofen's units finally arrived in and around the Crimea later that month, local air units continued to perform their various tasks. *General der Flieger* Kurt Pflugbeil's *Fliegerkorps IV* performed the vast majority of all air operations in the massive southern sector of the Eastern Front. Most of Pflugbeil's units operated in support of German armies in the Ukraine but several operated alongside *Oberst* Wolfgang von Wild's *Fliegerführer Süd*, a small anti-shipping air command, in support of von Manstein's troops in the Crimea. In April, the latter units were called upon to perform a wide range of anti-shipping tasks, including sea-mining. To prevent Soviet forces dug-in on the Kerch Peninsula gaining reinforcements by sea from the Kuban, and to ensure that no full-scale, Odessa-style evacuations occurred, von Manstein requested that *Fliegerkorps IV* mine the Kerch Straits.<sup>50</sup>

On 2 April, units commenced mining operations in the straits, which continued sporadically for several weeks.<sup>51</sup> Reluctant to 'waste' its already over-taxed resources on what it perceived to be a low-priority task, the air corps committed only a few aircraft (He 111s and Ju 88s) to the mining

missions. As no more than three magnetic mines could be carried in each, they proved incapable of laying dense minefields. The mines they dropped were never more than a nuisance to Soviet ships plying the sea lanes. Aware from air reconnaissance that Soviet minesweepers still patrolled the straits, *Admiral Schwarzes Meer*, the small German naval force in the Black Sea, actually anticipated this poor result: 'Because of Russian minesweepers reportedly in the Kerch Straits, one must accept that the contamination of these waters from the air will not be effective until Kerch itself is once again in our hands.'<sup>52</sup>

Von Wild's *Fliegerführer Süd*, still operating alongside *Luftflotte 4* units, ceaselessly bombed and strafed Soviet field installations, artillery batteries, troop concentrations and army rear areas in the Kerch Peninsula, and struck at Sevastopol's defensive strongpoints and supply centres. His small force was also determined to interdict sea supply routes and prevent enemy landings or evacuations during the coming offensives. As a result, it kept all Soviet forces, supply lines and possible reinforcement routes in the region under close and constant surveillance. Even Soviet naval historians acknowledged after the war that *Fliegerführer Süd*'s reconnaissance work was of the first order. 'In February 1942', wrote Achkasov and Pavlovich, 'previous high-sea convoy routes were replaced by new routes, since enemy aerial reconnaissance had increased on the former. However, in April we had to stop using the new routes, because they too were discovered by enemy reconnaissance.'<sup>53</sup>

*Fliegerführer Süd* also hammered Soviet ports and potential embarkation points on the Crimean and Caucasian coasts. 'In the southern sector of *Luftflotte 4*'s combat zone', *Luftwaffe* historians noted in 1944, 'the heaviest weight of the fighting fell on the harbors in question, which supplied Sevastopol and the enemy forces dug-in on the Kerch Peninsula.'<sup>54</sup> Von Wild's force lacked the resources necessary to totally immobilize the Soviets' shipping operations. In particular, it proved incapable of preventing small Soviet vessels laying both offensive minefields in sea routes now starting to be used by German supply ships and defensive minefields around Sevastopol and the south Crimean coastline.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, through careful deployment and constant attacks, *Fliegerführer Süd* was able to destroy many harbor installations and disrupt a substantial amount of enemy supply shipments.

German air units did not have the skies over the Crimea and the Black Sea entirely to themselves. During the winter, the Soviet aviation industry, now safely relocated beyond the Urals, had slowly regained and then increased its pre-war productive capacity. Accordingly, the Red Air Force (*Voyenno-vozdushnyye sily*, or *VVS*), including units in the south, slowly recovered its strength. The *Luftwaffe* estimated at the beginning of March that the *VVS* had no fewer than 722 aircraft based on 40 separate airfields throughout *Luftflotte 4*'s huge combat zone.<sup>56</sup> Although this estimate is more

than 15 per cent too high, the VVS certainly had at least as many aircraft in the region as the *Luftwaffe*. Desperate to regain the Crimea, the Soviets operated fighters, fighter-bombers and bombers from four airfields on the Kerch Peninsula and 10 in the northwestern Caucasus. Few of the fighters, however, were the excellent new models (such as the Yakovlev Yak-7B and the Lavotchkin La-5) now being produced in the Urals. The majority of those went straight to the central zone in anticipation of a new German campaign to take the capital, as did most of the Lend-Lease British and American aircraft already reaching the Soviet Union. Whilst the VVS units in the south did receive some of the latest aircraft, by March the vast bulk of their fighters and bombers were still antiquated and inferior types posing no real threat to the *Luftwaffe*'s latest Bf 109s. Their fighters included the Polikarpov I-153 *Chaika* (Gull), the I-15 *Chato* (Snub-nose), and the truncated I-16 *Rata* (Rat), all dating from the Spanish Civil War period. The first two, both biplanes, were no match for their vastly superior German counterparts, and even the latter, a monoplane of better design, usually came off worst in aerial combat. As a result, these fighters 'fell like flies'.<sup>57</sup>

Determined to keep the airspace over von Manstein's troops free of enemy aircraft, *Fliegerführer Süd* devoted a great deal of effort to the surveillance, bombing and strafing of Soviet airfields, both on the Kerch Peninsula and in the northwestern Caucasus. Powerful Soviet flak defenses made this a dangerous task, but von Wild's units still managed to significantly damage many airfields and occasionally destroy aircraft caught on the ground. Of course, they also had to protect their own airfields from air attacks, which were constantly attempted but rarely accomplished by the courageous though out-classed Soviet fliers. In April alone, von Wild's units claimed 92 enemy aircraft destroyed in the air and a further 14 on the ground, suffering only seven recorded losses.<sup>58</sup> The most successful single day was 30 April, when Bf 109s of *II./J.G. 77* and *III./J.G. 52* shot down 24 Soviet fighters and bombers attacking their airfields (almost all of Spanish Civil War vintage), for no losses.<sup>59</sup> These figures, it should be pointed out, relate only to *Fliegerführer Süd*. Units belonging to Pflugbeil's *Fliegerkorps IV* and, after their arrival late in April, von Richthofen's *Fliegerkorps VIII*, racked up their own impressive tallies. On 2 May, for example, von Richthofen's fliers engaged Soviet aircraft during a bombing raid on their airfields. '32 verified kills', the air commander proudly jotted in his diary, 'with no losses'.<sup>60</sup> The VVS proved unable, therefore, to hamper significantly German preparations for their Crimean campaigns. By the time *Trappenjagd* commenced, local Soviet air forces had been severely weakened and German air superiority won. This made von Manstein's job a great deal easier than it would otherwise have been.

When von Richthofen's illustrious air corps arrived in the Crimea, it

immediately assumed operational command of von Wild's far smaller force. As a result, even the *Luftwaffe's* own historians, when looking back on the 1942 Crimean campaigns, focused closely on *Fliegerkorps VIII's* sensational support of von Manstein's army, but failed to mention specifically the role played before and during the campaigns by the less glamorous *Fliegerführer Süd*. The daily operational reports of von Wild's command, however, reveal that its contribution to German successes was significant. From 18 February, when it replaced *Sonderstab Krim* as the principal air force in the Crimea and Black Sea regions, until the opening of *Trappenjagd* on 8 May, *Fliegerführer Süd* did an effective job with the limited forces at its disposal. During that period, it conducted extensive reconnaissance and dropped no less than 350,000 propaganda leaflets over Soviet lines. It rained bombs down on Sevastopol and the ports in the Kerch Straits, sinking 68,450 tons of Soviet shipping (a third by torpedoes) and two submarines.<sup>61</sup> It critically damaged another submarine, which probably also sank, and less seriously damaged many ships, including 42,000 tons of merchant shipping, 1 heavy cruiser, 1 light cruiser, 4 submarines and a tug. Its list of 'probably damaged vessels' includes 21,500 additional tons of merchant shipping, a further submarine and a patrol boat.

*Fliegerführer Süd* also reported that it shot down as many as 204 Soviet fighters and bombers and smashed another 30 on the ground. On the battlefield (mainly at Kerch) it blew up three flak batteries and five artillery installations and heavily damaged 25 others. It knocked out no fewer than 64 tanks, damaged another 29, put 98 trucks off the road for good and left a further 36 damaged. Its attacks on army rear areas were equally effective, resulting in the destruction or incapacitation of 17 locomotives and trains, and the total destruction of five petrol dumps, various railway and industrial installations and numerous bridges. Heavy blows against ammunition dumps, infantry installations and troop concentrations 'also produced good results'. It is clear, therefore, that von Wild's force contributed significantly to German achievements in the critical period leading up to the opening of *Trappenjagd*. Its ability to contribute substantially to all forthcoming campaigns in the region, including both *Trappenjagd* and *Störfang*, was by no means diminished by the arrival of von Richthofen's powerful air corps.

On 7 May, von Richthofen held his final briefings with *Oberst* von Grodeck, whose motorized 'Grodeck Brigade' had been set up as von Manstein's reserve force, and later with Löhr and Korten, *Luftflotte 4's* Commander and Chief of Staff. With less than 24 hours until the campaign commenced, they still had matters to discuss, including inter-service cooperation, the latest situation reports and their intentions for the following day's offensive. *General* Friedrich Schulz, von Manstein's new Chief of

Staff, paid von Richthofen a visit later that evening. He did so, the latter scathingly wrote, 'in order to get some backbone'.<sup>62</sup>

### The Battle of Kerch 8–19 May 1942

Even as they talked, the preliminary operations for the attack got underway. Four companies of combat engineers and infantrymen climbed into 30 small assault boats and pushed off from Feodosiya harbor into the darkness of the Black Sea. This secret fleet's mission was to land just behind the Parpach anti-tank ditch at the same time as the main frontal offensive reached it early the next morning. This was only possible because the Soviet Black Sea Fleet was relatively inactive around Crimean coastlines at that time. Increasing air attacks on his ships by *Fliegerführer Süd* and elements of *Fliegerkorps IV* concerned Vice Admiral F.S. Oktyabrskii, commander of the Soviet fleet, so much back in February that he had ordered his captains to take great care in regions patrolled by enemy air forces.<sup>63</sup> In particular, they were to conduct coastal bombardment missions only under cover of darkness and were to risk none of their larger vessels except during periods when poor weather grounded the *Luftwaffe*. At that time, of course, the long hours of winter darkness had provided Oktyabrskii's vessels with excellent protection from air attack. Now, with far shorter nights and better weather conditions, plus much stronger *Luftwaffe* forces in the Crimea, far fewer naval missions were undertaken. Armed merchantmen, usually escorted by cruisers or destroyers, were still supplying Sevastopol most nights, and a few destroyers continued occasionally bombarding German positions on the southeast coast of the Crimea, but the Black Sea Fleet was only lightly and sporadically patrolling the Kerch Peninsula's southern coast.<sup>64</sup>

Also during the night of 7/8 May, von Manstein's divisions carried out last-minute preparations and moved into position for the attack. To hold the northern section of the front, von Manstein had committed *General* Frans von Matenkloft's 42nd Army Corps, comprising one German and three Romanian divisions. Three infantry divisions of 30th Army Corps were to rip a hole in the southern part of the front. The corps' 22nd Panzer and 170th Infantry Divisions were then to race through and drive deep into the Soviet rear, before wheeling north in the planned enveloping move.

At 0315, the German artillery erupted in a deafening barrage, accompanied by heavy howitzers, rockets and guns from von Richthofen's anti-aircraft units used in direct fire against ground targets. The infantry surged forward ten minutes later, followed shortly after by waves of *Fliegerkorps VIII*'s bombers and Stukas, which pounded the formidable Soviet defensive lines and shattered bunkers and gun placements. Ground-attack planes struck enemy airfields, logistics systems and almost



anything moving in the Soviet rear. These initial air operations, which created havoc in both forward and rear areas, were conducted in accordance with detailed and specific requests from the two army corps.

Many bomber units operated from airfields in Nikolayev and Kherson in Ukraine and, therefore, flew 330 and 270 kilometers respectively to reach the Kerch front. Others operated from fields in the central Crimea (many centred around Saki, Simferopol and Sarabus) and were able, as a result, to fly far more missions and carry heavier bomb-loads. Most Stukas and other ground-attack aircraft, including the brand-new Henschel Hs 129 (which 'made a good impression' on von Richthofen<sup>65</sup>), flew from these and newly-prepared fields even closer to the front. The Grammatikovo base, for example, was only 40 kilometers west of Ak Monai.

German fighters ceaselessly patrolled the skies above the Kerch Straits, preventing most Soviet aircraft based on airfields on the Taman Peninsula breaching their screen. The VVS desperately tried to stop *Luftwaffe* operations by putting up every available fighter, but their counter-attacks were poorly organized and their outclassed and outnumbered fighters proved little more than sitting ducks. No fewer than 82 were shot down on the first day alone by German fighters combing the skies for enemy planes as they sought, and gained, air superiority over the battlefield.<sup>66</sup> After the war, the official Soviet history placed blame for the VVS's poor showing squarely on the shoulders of Lieutenant General D.T. Kozlov, the Crimean Front Commander, and Commissar 1st Rank L.Z. Mekhlis, the *Stavka's* Front representative. 'The Command of the Front,' states the official history, 'absolutely failed to effect coordination of ground and air forces. Our aviation operated outside the general plan of the defensive operation and despite existing opportunities was not able to damage the enemy's air forces.'<sup>67</sup> German losses were indeed low. The first day was by far the worst: 10 aircraft lost with their crews, and a further 10 damaged.

Von Richthofen arrived that first morning at his forward command post 'just as the first bombs were falling'.<sup>68</sup> Remarkably, in light of his previous optimism, he suffered butterflies in his stomach: 'Usual attack tensions', he complained that evening, 'combined with morning chill. Always the same strange atmosphere, which only gradually loses its tension with its frequency.' He was soon delighted, however, by the performance of his air units, which conducted an impressive 2,100 missions and provided 'giant fire-magic the entire day' as they destroyed, damaged or pinned down Soviet forces.

An hour after the artillery barrage first began, the assault boats shot towards the section of coast where the anti-tank ditch ended in the sea. Under cover of Bf 109s strafing the bunkers and gun nests on the rim of the ditch, the boats sailed right into the ditch itself, allowing the troops to leap

ashore and begin spraying machine-gun fire at the startled Soviets. Meanwhile, the infantry divisions of *Generalleutnant* Maximilian Fretter-Pico's 30th Corps, assisted by artillery and covered by a constant stream of fighters and dive-bombers, had struggled through barbed wire entanglements and minefields and, under a hail of Soviet machine gun fire, succeeded in crossing the ditch itself. Aided by the troops from the assault boats, they were able to penetrate the enemy's forward positions. 'Nevertheless,' recalled von Manstein,

the battle was certainly not easy. The ground won on the far side of the tank-ditch was not yet sufficient for the [22nd] Panzer Division to be moved over. Additionally, the following attack by the 42nd Army Corps could only move forward with great difficulty. All the same, we had already encountered ten enemy divisions in the front and shattered its southern wing. Furthermore, the enemy's reserves appeared to remain behind his northern wing.<sup>69</sup>

During the night of 8–9 May, 22nd Panzer Division was unable to advance across the anti-tank ditch. Although engineers had blasted the ditch's steep walls with explosives in order to create several crossings, they were not yet wide or firm enough to take the division's tanks.<sup>70</sup> Fretter-Pico, therefore, decided instead to send first the lighter 'Grodeck Brigade', comprising a Romanian motorized regiment and two German truck-mounted infantry battalions. At noon, *Oberst* von Grodeck's brigade surged across the ditch and past 132nd Infantry Division, with orders to head towards Kerch with all possible speed. Stunned by the speed of the brigade's advance, Soviet divisions in its path 'fled back and disintegrated'.<sup>71</sup> As it happened, von Richthofen glumly wrote that evening, the brigade 'advanced so fast that, when it reached the eastern Tartar Ditch [the Sultanovka Line], it ran straight into our bombs. There were several losses.'<sup>72</sup>

Eleventh Army units had previously been instructed to mark their positions clearly in order to prevent 'friendly fire' incidents like this.<sup>73</sup> As in earlier campaigns, they were supposed to lay out white identification panels and, if necessary, use flares and smoke pots.<sup>74</sup> Ground troops were not yet able to establish direct radio contact with aircraft overhead. Inter-service communication was facilitated instead by *Fliegerverbindungsoffizier* (air liaison officers, or *Flivos*), specially-trained air force officers attached to forward ground units. In constant radio communication with their air corps, *Flivos* appraised the corps of the situation and the intentions of the ground units, advised army commanders on the most practical use of airpower and passed on their requests for air assistance.<sup>75</sup> This system worked well when *Luftwaffe* units were attacking clearly-defined enemy positions during static

or slow-moving operations, but not satisfactorily during operations like *Trappenjagd*, when the situation on the ground was far more fluid.

Late in the afternoon of 9 May – to return to the battle – 22nd Panzer Division finally crossed the Parpach ditch and, accompanied by infantry and strongly supported by the *Luftwaffe*, rolled eastward several kilometers. It beat off an attack by a Soviet tank brigade, then swung, as planned, to the north. Everything was going far too slowly for the army commander. 'Back to the command post', von Richthofen recorded, 'where von Manstein was. In my opinion, he was worried. I calmed him down and pointed to our decisive actions planned for the next few hours. He remained skeptical.'<sup>76</sup> Despite von Manstein's concerns about the rate of progress, things were actually going according to plan. If 22nd Panzer Division kept pushing northward, it would reach the sea before dark, trapping the greater part of the two Soviet armies still fighting in the northern sector of the front. However, an hour before dusk, all operations ground to a halt when a heavy spring rain poured down, quickly turning the ground into a muddy morass. Von Richthofen, whose air units had flown more than 1,700 sorties and shot down 42 enemy aircraft that day, with only two losses, felt frustrated by the weather but confident of ultimate success. 'Unless the weather itself stops us', he bluntly wrote, 'no Russian will leave the Crimea alive.'

The 22nd Panzer Division struggled forward through the mud until several hours after dark. A thick fog covered the saturated ground the next morning, preventing the early resumption of both air and ground operations. Throwing up mud and carving deep track-marks in the loamy soil, the tanks, still supported by infantrymen, finally began churning forward again in the early afternoon. A powerful Soviet artillery barrage hit the division with punishing blows until von Richthofen, watching from his *Storch* high above the battlefield (which almost cost him his life when enemy flak filled his plane with shrapnel), threw every available aircraft into the fray. They quickly silenced the Soviet guns. Von Grodeck was still pushing forward towards Kerch but wanted air support to take some of the heat off his brigade. However, von Richthofen's planes were of limited use to him, because pilots and gunners were unable to distinguish German from Russian troops in the chaotic conditions on the ground.<sup>77</sup> The air commander's jubilant diary entry for that evening reveals that, all things considered, the operation was progressing well: 'By sunset we have isolated ten Red divisions, except for a narrow gap. The pocket is almost closed. In the morning the extermination can begin.'

During the night of 10–11 May, poor visibility curtailed the *Luftwaffe*'s operations against the narrow gap in the pocket centred around Ak Monai. Dense ground fog in the morning hampered operations until 1100, but once the fog lifted von Richthofen's air units attacked in mass the Soviet units

still holding open the gap. 'Only after plenty of air support,' he claimed without exaggeration, 'were they [22nd Panzer and 132nd Infantry Divisions] able to break through to the Sea of Azov and close the pocket, out of which the enemy has been streaming since last night.' No fewer than ten panic-stricken divisions were trapped, but those who had managed to escape and flee eastward were hardly better off. They made splendid targets for von Richthofen's ground attack aircraft, which rained down bombs of all calibers, including 'devil's eggs' and other anti-personnel projectiles. The air leader was initially delighted by the 'wonderful scene'.<sup>78</sup> 'We are inflicting the highest losses of blood and *matériel*', he wrote. However, after overseeing air operations on other sectors of the Kerch Peninsula – where, he alleged, the army 'still had winter fear in their bones' and were not attacking the enemy aggressively enough – he flew again over the area where the gap in the pocket had been. This time he was amazed by the level of destruction caused by his aircraft. 'Terrible! Corpse-strewn fields from earlier attacks ... I have seen nothing like it so far in this war.' He was so shocked, in fact, that the following day he took *General* Hermann Martini, the *Luftwaffe*'s Chief Signals Officer, to see the grisly sight.

On 12 May, 50th Infantry and 28th Light Divisions remained around the pocket, which steadily disintegrated throughout the day, while all other available German forces raced eastward along essentially the same path as von Grodeck's brigade had taken. The *Luftwaffe* provided excellent support. By dusk, 132nd and 170th Infantry Divisions were within sight of the Sultanovka Line, with 22nd Panzer Division, which had turned east immediately after closing the pocket, steadily advancing behind them. Von Grodeck's brigade was now in a vulnerable position on the eastern side of the Sultanovka Line, but was able to fight off heavy attacks with the aid of urgently-requested fighter aircraft.

Things were going poorly indeed for the Soviets. Two days earlier, the *Stavka* had ordered Kozlov to pull his armies back to the Sultanovka Line. They were to hold this line at all costs. However, the commander vacillated and delayed executing the order for almost 48 hours. He then failed to organize the withdrawal properly.<sup>79</sup> Thus, when German troops appeared on 12 May at the Sultanovka Line, far behind Kozlov's headquarters, the Soviet command structure collapsed. Numerous divisions, broken and disoriented, began retreating eastwards in various states of disorder. Kozlov's command was no longer capable of affecting decisive actions. The few remaining *VVS* units in the region, for instance, were never ordered to provide retreating columns with air cover. As the official Soviet history states: 'Frontal aviation was not employed by the command in a reasonable manner. It did not even attempt to organize mass strikes on the most important enemy groupings and cover the pull-back of its [ground] forces, who were subjected to constant attack by enemy aviation.'<sup>80</sup>

Enjoying total air supremacy, von Richthofen's units flew over 1,500 sorties that day. They provided the army with excellent support by dropping ammunition to von Grodeck's brigade, pounding the Soviet columns streaming eastward and troops dug-in behind the Sultanovka Line, and hammering Kerch and the other ports on the peninsula's eastern tip. Von Manstein's earlier prediction that *Trappenjagd* would have 'concentrated air support the like of which has never existed' was being fulfilled. That notwithstanding, 12 May was an unhappy day for von Richthofen. To his horror, the *Luftwaffe* High Command ordered him hastily to send many of his key units 500 kilometers north to Kharkov, where a major Soviet offensive had just struck. His diary entry for that day has a matter-of-fact tone: 'Apparently Kharkov is a colossal mess; the Russians broke through with tanks in two places. We must release one fighter, one dive-bomber and two bomber groups!'<sup>81</sup> His entry for the following day reveals more clearly his feelings on the matter: 'The matter at Kharkov stinks considerably. I must give up further bomber groups, two fighter groups and two dive-bomber groups. That is, practically everything! By order of the *Führer*. I report, therefore, that the successful completion of Kerch now looks questionable.'

Despite the air commander's angry statement, the likelihood of German success on the Kerch Peninsula was certainly *not* questionable; when 132nd and 170th Infantry Divisions broke through the Sultanovka Line in the morning of 13 May, followed a few hours later by 22nd Panzer Division, total success seemed imminent. Nonetheless, between them and Kerch lay columns of fleeing Soviet troops, who hoped to save themselves by crossing the narrow straits to the Caucasian mainland, but also pockets of stiff resistance. The following afternoon, 132nd Infantry Division brought Kerch under fire from the south, while 170th Infantry Division advanced behind the *Luftwaffe*'s 'curtain of steel' and pushed right into the city's outskirts. Resistance remained fierce. Von Richthofen knew that the Soviets hoped to hold back the German advance long enough to allow the troops massed on the beaches to be ferried by small vessels of the Black Sea naval, merchant and fishing fleets across the straits in a Dunkirk-like evacuation.<sup>82</sup> He was also acutely aware that his air corps no longer possessed sufficient forces to contribute to the battle as substantially as before. 'The Russians are sailing across the narrows in small craft', he fumed on 14 May, 'and we can do nothing about it. It makes me sick!'<sup>83</sup> The next day, Jeschonnek arrived at his command post ('which is now superfluous because I have nothing left to command'), in order to inspect the front. The highly-frustrated commander took Jeschonnek to Kerch. 'One isn't sure whether to cry or curse', he bitterly wrote that night, adding: 'The Reds remain massed on the beaches and cross the sea at their leisure. Infantry and tanks can't advance

because of the desperately-resisting Reds and we [the *Luftwaffe*] can't do anything because we don't have adequate forces. The whole situation will yet turn out badly.'<sup>84</sup>

Kerch fell on 15 May, prompting the German Army Chief of Staff *Generaloberst* Franz Halder prematurely to state that 'the Kerch offensive may be considered closed. Only the promontory north of the city must still be cleared up.'<sup>85</sup> Two days later, however, he had to admit that certain Soviet units continued to put up 'fanatical resistance'. Despite suffering terrible losses, they clearly still hoped to hold back German troops long enough for a seaborne evacuation to be organized. Although von Richthofen's account suggests that his units were powerless to prevent any attempts to evacuate the terrified Soviets, between 13 and 17 May aircraft of *Fliegerkorps VIII* and *Fliegerführer Süd* made constant attacks against troop concentrations on the beaches and gunboats and other small vessels in the Kerch Straits.<sup>86</sup> Despite their numerical weakness, they destroyed various flak and artillery installations, bombed assembly and embarkation points, sank and damaged a number of small vessels, and forced several others aground. Their efforts, coupled with those of the army, which laid a blistering artillery barrage on 17 May, quickly brought the improvised Odessa-style evacuation to an end. Von Richthofen, who had constantly fumed in his diary that the army lacked aggression, was relieved to see the result of the army's concentrated gunfire: 'Finally the army brings every available gun together and fires with 80 batteries into the narrows. Infantry advances and breaks through. By sunset the battle is all but over. At last!'<sup>87</sup> Historian John Erickson graphically described the same scene:

Over the remnants of the Crimean Front Manstein now laid a mass artillery barrage, blowing men, guns and tanks to pieces; with more gunfire the Germans drove off the Black Sea Fleet motor gunboats trying desperately to lift the troops off the beach where they were being battered to death. In this 'ghastly mess'... [the Soviet Command] struggled to exercise some control over the situation but this broke down in the great welter of chaos and confusion.<sup>88</sup>

Sporadic fighting on the Kerch Peninsula continued for another week, but on 19 May von Manstein felt sufficiently satisfied with the situation to declare *Trappenjagd* completed. It was a stunning success. 'According to our reports', he recorded in his memoirs,

around 170,000 prisoners, 1,133 guns and 258 tanks fell into our hands. Five German infantry divisions and one Panzer division, as well as two Rumanian infantry divisions and one cavalry brigade, had destroyed two full armies [and the greater part of a third] comprising

26 major formations. Only insignificant elements of the enemy were able to cross the Straits of Kerch to the Taman Peninsula.<sup>89</sup>

Although he failed to mention it, *Luftwaffe* and army units had also smashed Crimean VVS forces. They destroyed airfields, hangars, supply systems and as many as 323 aircraft during the two-week battle.<sup>90</sup> The only VVS unit left in the Crimea was Third Special Air Group of the Sevastopol Defense Region, operating from airfields within the fortress area.<sup>91</sup> It now comprised a meagre 60 obsolete aircraft, a substantial drop from its November 1941 strength of more than 300. Vastly outclassed and outnumbered (more than ten to one) by German aircraft, these old machines would prove incapable of contributing to the defense of the fortress during the coming siege.<sup>92</sup>

Not wishing to suggest that his army had won the Battle of Kerch by itself, von Manstein praised von Richthofen's air corps for its outstanding support. '*Fliegerkorps VIII* contributed decisively to this successful outcome', he added. 'A true battle of annihilation was victoriously fought.'<sup>93</sup> Indeed, the air corps – which flew between 1,000 and 2,000 missions per day before the diversion of key units to Kharkov, and between 300 and 800 after – had certainly lived up to expectations. In particular, the crushing blows it dealt the enemy in the first days of the battle, including precision attacks on field headquarters and command posts, enabled Axis ground forces to overcome their numerical inferiority and break through the apparently-impregnable defensive lines. After the war, the Soviets blamed themselves for *Fliegerkorps VIII's* effectiveness in those first days:

The unconcern of the Army and Front staffs, the insufficiently camouflaged command posts, and the failure to periodically move their locations, facilitated the German aviation, which bombed these posts in the first attacks, destroying wire communications and the control of troops. The staffs were not prepared for the utilization of radio and other means of communication.<sup>94</sup>

Von Richthofen was naturally delighted by his corps' superb performance over the last two weeks of furious combat but realized, even during the euphoric days after fighting finished, that a much tougher task for his men lay ahead: the siege of Sevastopol, probably the world's strongest fortress at that time. After spending the afternoon of 19 May surveying the carnage on the beaches near Kerch – where 'dreadfully many dead horses and Russians lay strewn, and stinking accordingly' – he had a lengthy telephone discussion about the future with Jeschonnek and Martini.<sup>95</sup> 'One sees', he noted in his diary, 'that the Supreme Command is too optimistic regarding future deadlines and the army's combat strength. I have doubts!!'

As it happened, his doubts proved unfounded. Success at Kerch enabled

von Manstein's Eleventh Army and von Richthofen's *Fliegerkorps VIII* to concentrate all their forces for a massive assault on Sevastopol without fear of being struck in the back. Less than a month after the attack began in early June, the fortress-port city lay in German hands, its garrison destroyed and its residents driven out of its devastated suburbs.

## Conclusions

To offer some concluding remarks, then, the *Luftwaffe* played a key role in the Kerch offensive. Its contribution to the battle extended far beyond the very heavy blows it dealt Soviet defenders in the battle's opening days, which enabled von Manstein's troops to break through apparently-impregnable defensive lines held by numerically superior forces. Even before the battle commenced, the *Luftwaffe* had inflicted strong blows on Soviet forces digging in behind the Parpach line and, more importantly, had created sufficient alarm among commanders of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet that they were unwilling to risk deploying capital ships in waters around the Kerch Peninsula. Thus, when the offensive began on 8 May, the Black Sea Fleet had no large warships in the region, which allowed von Manstein's forces to use those waters themselves for skirting the Parpach line and then to concentrate on storming Soviet defensive positions without suffering losses to bombardment by warships off the coast. Also, throughout the duration of the offensive *Luftwaffe* units patrolling sea routes around the Crimea prevented Soviet reinforcements entering the Kerch Peninsula and, after they succeeded in shattering Soviet defenses, prevented large-scale evacuations to the Caucasus coast taking place.

The *Luftwaffe* also prevented VVS forces based in the northern Caucasus from inflicting high losses on von Manstein's army as it bulldozed its way through the Soviet lines. In fact, Eleventh Army's losses to the VVS were almost non-existent. VVS losses to the *Luftwaffe*, on the other hand, were extremely high, leaving Soviet air forces in the northern Caucasus with little to throw against the German army when it swept into that vast region in late July. The *Luftwaffe*'s destruction of VVS units in the Crimea also gave German forces attacking Sevastopol a tremendous advantage. Not only were von Manstein's troops able to advance without fear of air attack (an uncommon experience during modern war), but both *Luftwaffe* air and flak units were able to commence army support operations against the fortress without having first to wage a time-consuming and costly battle for air superiority and then to spend a considerable number of sorties on escort and protection operations.

It is clear, therefore, that the *Luftwaffe*'s substantial contribution to the Kerch offensive warrants greater attention than it has hitherto received. It



was decisive not only to that endeavour, but also to the following campaign against Sevastopol, which benefited directly and substantially from the *Luftwaffe's* fine performance at Kerch.

## NOTES

1. Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Federal Military Archives), Freiburg, Germany (hereafter cited as BA/MA) RM 7/259: *Bericht über Besprechung am 30.4.1942. Ort: Berghof. Diensttuender Adjutant: Generalmajor Schmudt. gKdos. Gegenstand: Der Führer bespricht die militärische Lage.*
2. *Weisung Nr. 41*, in W. Hubatsch (ed.) *Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegführung, 1939–45. Dokumente des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht* (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe 1983), pp.183–8. Readers interested in Hitler's insistence on an offensive to clear up the Crimea should see my 'Hitler's Quest for Oil: The Impact of Economic Considerations on Military Strategy, 1941–1942', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18/4 (Dec.1995) pp.94–135.
3. E. von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn: Athenäum 1955) p.256. Published in English as *Lost Victories* (London: Methuen 1958) and in subsequent editions.
4. [General Staff of the Red Army,] *Collection of Materials on the Use of War Experience No. 5 (1943)*, published as *Soviet Documents on the Use of War Experience Volume III: Military Operations 1941-1942* Trans. by H. Orenstein (London: Frank Cass 1993) p.155.
5. *Ibid.* pp.150, 159.
6. *Ibid.* p.150.
7. *Ibid.*
8. E.F. Ziemke and M.E. Bauer, *Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision in the East* (Washington DC: US Army Centre of Military History 1987), p.262.
9. *Ibid.*; H. Plocher, *The German Air Force versus Russia, 1942* USAF Historical Studies, No.154 (USAF Historical Div., Research Studies Inst., Air University 1966) p.178.
10. P. Carell, *Stalingrad: the Defeat of the Sixth Army* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History reprint 1993) p.23.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Ziemke and Bauer (note 8) p.263.
14. *Ibid.* p.264.
15. R.J. Overy, 'Hitler and Air Strategy', *Journal of Contemporary History* 15 (1980) pp.405–21.
16. F. Halder, *Kriegstagebuch: Tägliche Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Generalstabes des Heeres, 1939–1942* Ed. by H.-A. Jacobsen (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer 1965) Vol.III, p.408.
17. *Ibid.* p.412.
18. P.E. Schramm (general ed.) *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmachtführungsstab) 1940–1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe 1961) Vol.II, p.321 (13 April 1942).
19. Halder, *Kriegstagebuch* Vol.III, p.421 (28 March 1942).
20. National Archives, Washington DC (hereafter cited as NARS) T971/18/975–81: *OKL, Chef Genst. 7644/42 Chefsache – Notiz über die Besprechung beim Führer am 17.4.1942, bezüglich Einsatz der Luftflotte 4.*
21. The largest operational commands within air fleets were the *Fliegerkorps* (air corps). These commands, always designated by roman numerals (*Fliegerkorps I, II, III, IV* and so on), normally functioned under the authority of the air fleet in the region. On numerous occasions throughout the war, however, the *Luftwaffe* High Command directed certain *Fliegerkorps* to operate independently and under the direction of their own commanders, who were usually of *Generalleutnant* or *General der Flieger* rank. Air fleets seldom controlled more than one *Fliegerkorps* at a time, although in critical theaters or during major offensives a fleet might

- assume control of two (and sometimes even elements of a third). *Fliegerkorps* differed markedly in size and composition, depending on the importance of theaters and the nature of operations each air corps was called upon to perform, but 'typical' corps during the first two years of war in the east possessed between 350 and 600 aircraft of different types (bombers, fighters and so on).
22. By the time the war in Europe finished in May 1945, the *Luftwaffe* had organized all its operational aircraft into seven *Luftflotten* (air fleets), three more than it had when hostilities broke out six years earlier. They were designated *Luftflotten 1, 2, 3, 4* (the original four), 5, 6, 7 and *Reich* (created during the war, the latter being responsible for home air defense). Each *Luftflotte* was similar to an individual 'Air Force' within the United States Army Air Forces; that is, it was a self-contained air command, comprising all types of combat units (bomber, dive-bomber, ground-attack, fighter and reconnaissance) as well as transport, flak and signals units. Senior operational commanders – usually of *Generaloberst* or *Generalfeldmarschall* rank – headed the command staff of each air fleet, exercising full authority over subordinate *Fliegerkorps*.
  23. Manstein (note 3) p.256.
  24. R. Muller, *The German Air War in Russia* (Baltimore, MD: Nautical and Aviation Publishing 1992) p.70.
  25. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 18 April 1942.
  26. *Ibid.* 19 April 1942.
  27. S.W. Mitcham, *Men of the Luftwaffe* (Novato, CA: Presidio 1988) p.170.
  28. Details of von Richthofen's life and career, plus his personal papers and diaries from 1937 to 1944, can be found in the *Nachlaß Dr. Wolfram Frhr. v. Richthofen* (BA/MA N671). For his time in Spain, see Vols. I, II and III. His abbreviated service record is in BA/MA MSG I/1248.
  29. United States Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama (hereafter cited as USAFHRA) K113.3017 Vol.1: *VIII. Fliegerkorps im Einsatz Sewastopol 1942 (Juni) (aus der Studie der 8. Abt. 'Erfahrungen aus dem Einsatz der Luftwaffe gegen Festungen')*.
  30. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 21 April 1942.
  31. *Ibid.*
  32. *Ibid.* 22 April 1942.
  33. Manstein (note 3) p.258.
  34. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 28 April 1942.
  35. *Ibid.* 2 May 1942.
  36. Muller (note 24) p.72.
  37. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 27 April 1942.
  38. *Ibid.* 2 May 1942.
  39. *Ibid.*
  40. Ziemke and Bauer (note 8) p.264.
  41. *Ibid.*
  42. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 4 May 1942.
  43. *Ibid.* 28 April 1942.
  44. Ziemke and Bauer (note 8) p.264.
  45. *Ibid.*
  46. Carell (note 10) p.25; Manstein (note 3) p.259.
  47. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 7 May 1942.
  48. *Ibid.* 28 April 1942.
  49. Muller (note 24) p.72.
  50. BA/MA RM 35 III/25: *Kriegstagebuch des Marine-Gruppenkommandos Süd* (hereafter cited as *KTB Mar. Gr. Süd*), 1.-15. April 1942.
  51. BA/MA RM 7/115: *KTB, 1/Skl. Teil B IX: Lageübersicht, Mittelmeer-Ägäis-Schwarzes Meer, 1.-15. April 1942*.
  52. BA/MA RM 35 III/25: *KTB Mar. Gr. Süd, 1.-15. April 1942*.
  53. V.I. Achkasov and N.B. Pavlovich, *Soviet Naval Operations in the Great Patriotic War* Trans. from Russian by the US Naval Intelligence Command Translation Project and

- Members of the Naval Reserve Intelligence Command Translations Unit 0166 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst. Press 1981) p.332.
54. NARS T971/51/522-534: *Der Luftkrieg in Rußland 1942 (Chef Genstb. der Luftwaffe, 8. Abt., 1944)*.
  55. BA/MA RM 35 III/25: *KTB Mar. Gr. Süd, 1.-15. April 1942*; USAFHRA K113.309-3 Vol.5: *Die deutsche Luftwaffe in Rußland, 1. Halbjahr 1942 (Vorstudie der 8. Abt., Chef Genstb. der Luftwaffe, 1944)*.
  56. Plocher (note 9) p.15.
  57. R. Higham and J.W. Kipp (eds.) *Soviet Aviation and Air Power: A Historical View* (London: Brassey's 1978) p.84.
  58. Statistics compiled from daily 'kills' and 'losses' listed in BA/MA RL 8/86: *Fliegerführer Süd, Tageseinsatz-Meldungen*, entries for April 1942.
  59. *Ibid.* 30 April 1942.
  60. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 2 May 1942.
  61. These statistics are derived from *Erfolgsübersicht des Fliegerführer Süd vom 19.2.-30.4.42*, appended to the 30 April entry in BA/MA RL 8/86: *Fliegerführer Süd, Tageseinsatz-Meldungen*.
  62. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB* 7 May 1942.
  63. Achkasov and Pavlovich (note 53) p.184. Readers interested in Oktyabrskii's response to Luftwaffe attacks on his fleet should consult my doctoral thesis ('Seeking the Philosopher's Stone: Luftwaffe Operations during Hitler's Drive to the South-East, 1942-1943' U. of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand 1996).
  64. *Fliegerführer Süd's* reconnaissance aircraft discovered only a small amount of enemy shipping around the Crimea during this period, and that was overwhelmingly merchant and not naval in nature. See BA/MA RL 8/86: *Fliegerführer Süd, Tageseinsatz-Meldungen*; F. Ruge, *The Soviets as Naval Opponents, 1941-1945* (Cambridge: Patrick Stephens 1979) p.78.
  65. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 6 May 1942.
  66. *Ibid.* 8 May 1942.
  67. *History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945*, translated from Russian by the US Center for Military History (Wilmington, OH: Scholarly Resources 1984) Vol.II, pp.405-6.
  68. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 8 May 1942.
  69. Manstein (note 3) p.259.
  70. Ziemke and Bauer (note 8) p.267.
  71. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 9 May 1942.
  72. *Ibid.*
  73. Muller (note 24) p.73.
  74. For the development of these identification methods - which were first employed by *Schlachtstaffeln* during the Great War and reintroduced by von Richthofen during the Spanish Civil War - see James S. Corum, 'The Luftwaffe's Army Support Doctrine, 1918-1941', *Journal of Military History* 59/1 (Jan. 1995) pp.53-76.
  75. USAFHRA 512.625-3: *Fliegerkorps VIII Staff, Operations Department (Reconnaissance Branch), No. 7790/42, Secret, 29.7.1942: Standing Order to the Reconnaissance Units of Fliegerkorps VIII* (note: this is an American Intelligence translation of a document captured by the Russians).
  76. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 9 May 1942.
  77. *Ibid.* 10 May 1942.
  78. *Ibid.* 11 May 1942.
  79. *History of the Great Patriotic War*, Vol.II, p.406.
  80. *Ibid.* Vol.II, 405.
  81. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 12 May 1942.
  82. *History of the Great Patriotic War*, Vol.II, pp.405, 406.
  83. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 14 May 1942.
  84. *Ibid.*, 15 May 1942.
  85. Halder, *Kriegstagebuch* (note 16) Vol.III, p.442.

86. BA/MA RL 8/86: *Fliegerführer Süd, Tageseinsatz-Meldungen*, 13–17 May 1942.
87. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 17 May 1942.
88. J. Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad: Stalin's War with Germany, Volume 1* (London: Weidenfeld 1993. First pub. 1975) p.349.
89. Manstein (note 3) p.261.
90. F. Kurowski, *Balkenkreuz und Roter Stern: die Luftkrieg über Rußland 1941–1944* (Friedburg: Podzun-Pallas 1984) pp.276–7. Karl von Tippelskirch claims that 323 aircraft were captured, not destroyed. However, there is apparently no reliable evidence supporting this claim (K. von Tippelskirch, *Geschichte des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (Bonn: Athenäum 1951) p.277.
91. Achkasov and Pavlovich (note 53) pp.78, 84.
92. NARS T971/18/856-883: *Erfahrungen und Auswirkung beim Einsätze der Luftwaffe im Kämpfe um Festungen (Erläutert an dem Beispiel des Kampfes um Sewastopol im Juni 1942)* (OKL, Chef Genstb. 8. Abt., Anlage zu Br.B. Nr. 1803/44 Geheim! Wien, am 16. Juni 1944), esp. Anlage 4.
93. Manstein (note 3) p.261.
94. *History of the Great Patriotic War*, Vol.II, p.405.
95. BA/MA N671/9: *Richthofen TB*, 19 May 1942.