

David J. Ails 2017

# 'BUTCHER BIRDS' OVER BRITAIN

The Focke-Wulf Fw 190, known to those who flew or worked on it as the Würger ('Butcher Bird'), arrived in France in late July 1941, but unlike the Messerschmitt Bf 109 was seldom seen in the skies over Britain. **Chris Goss** describes some of those rare occasions when the Fw 190 appeared in British skies.

In July 1941, Erprobungsstaffel 190, the unit responsible for operationally testing the Focke-Wulf Fw 190, moved from Rechin in Germany to Le Bourget near Paris and began converting II Gruppe/Jagdgeschwader 26 (II./JG 26), commanded by Knight's Cross holder Hauptmann (Hptm) Walter Adolph, to the Fw 190A, starting with Oberleutnant (ObLt) Walter Schneider's 6 Staffel. By the start of September 1941, all of II Gruppe had converted, but it is believed that the first combat took place in the early morning of August 16, 1941 when Hptm Adolph led a mixed Fw 190/Bf 109 formation and claimed to have shot down four Spitfires. The first Fw 190 to be lost was on August

Above: **Artwork depicting 41 Sqn's Pilot Officer Cyril Babbage's victory over an Fw 190 on September 18, 1941.** David Ails/www.aillsaviationart.com

21, 1941 when Oberfeldwebel (Ofw) Walter Meyer of 6./JG 26 suffered engine failure and, on August 29, 1941, Leutnant (Lt) Heinz Schenk, also from 6 Staffel, was shot down and killed by German flak.

RAF pilots soon reported encountering radial-engined fighters over France, and thought they were ex-French Air Force Curtiss Hawk 75s, but as one RAF pilot noted: "No Hawk ever had the performance of that brute!" They soon realised that they were up against the Fw 190.

The first ever combat loss of an Fw 190 occurred at 1050hrs on September 18, 1941. Scrambled from Moorseele in Belgium to intercept Bristol Blenheims attacking a convoy off Ostend, Walter Adolph led II./JG 26 to meet them. Plt Off Cyril Babbage of 41 Sqn records what happened: "...this enemy aircraft appeared to be similar to the Curtiss 75A, but with slimmer fuselage. The enemy passed beneath me and I saw crosses on the fuselage. It then turned south at high speed and I followed it. I got within range just off Ostend, and fired a five-second burst with cannon and machine guns from dead astern. The enemy aircraft broke up and crashed into the sea..."

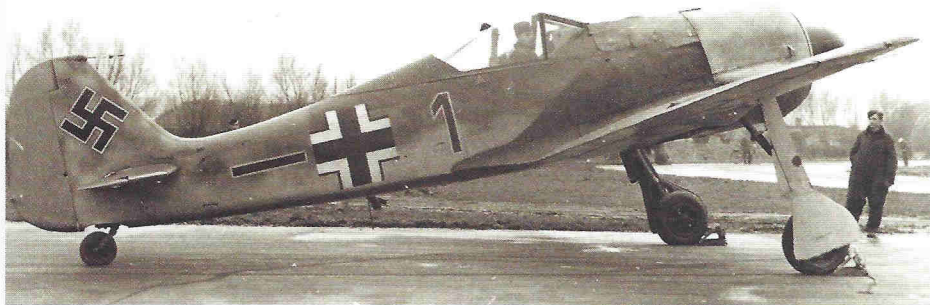
The body of Walter Adolph, who had one victory in Spain and 24 in World War Two, was washed ashore the following month.

More Gruppe pilots from JG 26 now converted to the Fw 190, followed in 1942 by JG 2, and RAF pilots were

finding out how inferior their Spitfires were, especially when the Fw 190 was flown by an experienced pilot. However, the Fw 190 by this point had only been used over Europe and the Channel, and the RAF still knew little about the German fighter. This would all change on June 23, 1942.

Early that evening, six Douglas Bostons of 107 Sqn took off from Exeter to attack a target at Morlaix in Brittany, the escort being provided by Spitfires of the Perranporth and Exeter Wings. At Cherbourg-Maupertus, Fw 190s of III./JG 2 were scrambled and followed the RAF back to the Devon coast, where they pounced.

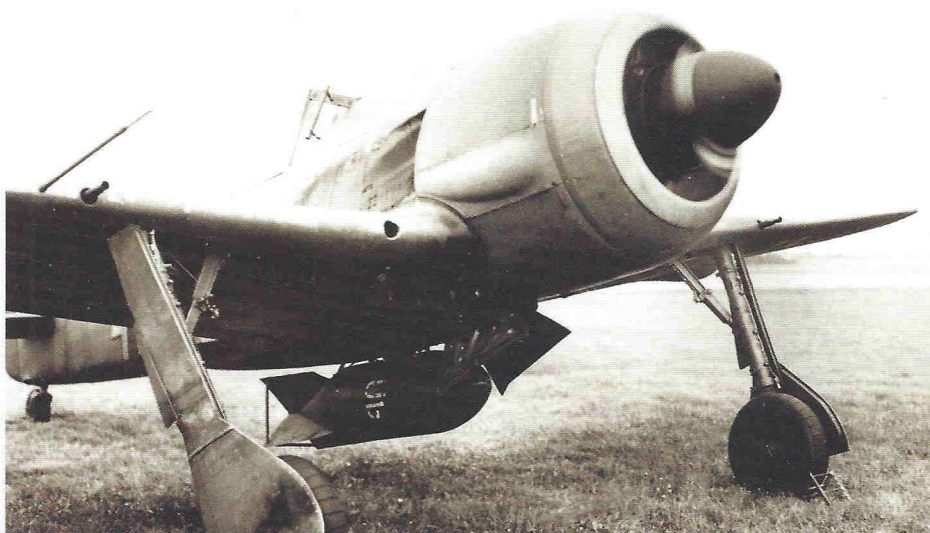
One Fw 190 collided with the Exeter Wing Leader, the pilot of the German aircraft baling out and being captured, the latter being killed. A series of dogfights then ensued with the RAF coming off worse. Oblt Armin Faber of Stab III./JG 2 shot down a Spitfire of 310 Sqn and probably damaged another from 19 Sqn, after which he apparently became disorientated and landed his Fw 190A-3 at RAF Pembrey in South Wales, presenting the RAF with a pristine Fw 190 that would be comprehensively evaluated. As a result, plans to mount a Commando raid to capture



Above: **Focke-Wulf Fw 190-equipped 6./JG 26 conducted operations off the coast of the UK.**

All photos via Chris Goss

Below: **A SC250 250kg bomb on the centreline of a Fw 190 A-4.**



an Fw 190 were understandably cancelled.

Despite the secrets of the Fw 190 being revealed at last, very few Fw 190s operating in the pure fighter role would be seen or even lost over Britain. A few Störangriff (nuisance attacks) were carried out by Fw 190s, striking targets at low level and high speed using gunfire, but the first Fw 190 loss on such a mission did not occur until October 21, 1942 when Feldwebel (Fw) Werner Brychy of 4./JG 2 flew into a hillside at Lulworth in Dorset. Then, on October 31, 1942, Fw Alfred Hell of 5./JG 2 was shot down by flak and captured

at Sandwich in Kent whilst escorting a fighter-bomber mission against Canterbury. The final Fw 190 operating as a pure fighter to come down on land did so in quite spectacular fashion on November 27, 1942 as an

eyewitness recalls:

“Two Fw 190s carried out a low-level raid on Ashford. A locomotive fireman was killed by a cannon shell. The two planes then flew on across Romney Marsh and opened fire

on a train leaving Lydd Station. The leading Fw 190 expended some of its ammunition without an apparent effect. The second plane flew so low that it hit and ripped away the steam dome of the train's boiler, and the resulting explosion of high-pressure steam caused the aircraft to crash, disintegrating over a wide area...”

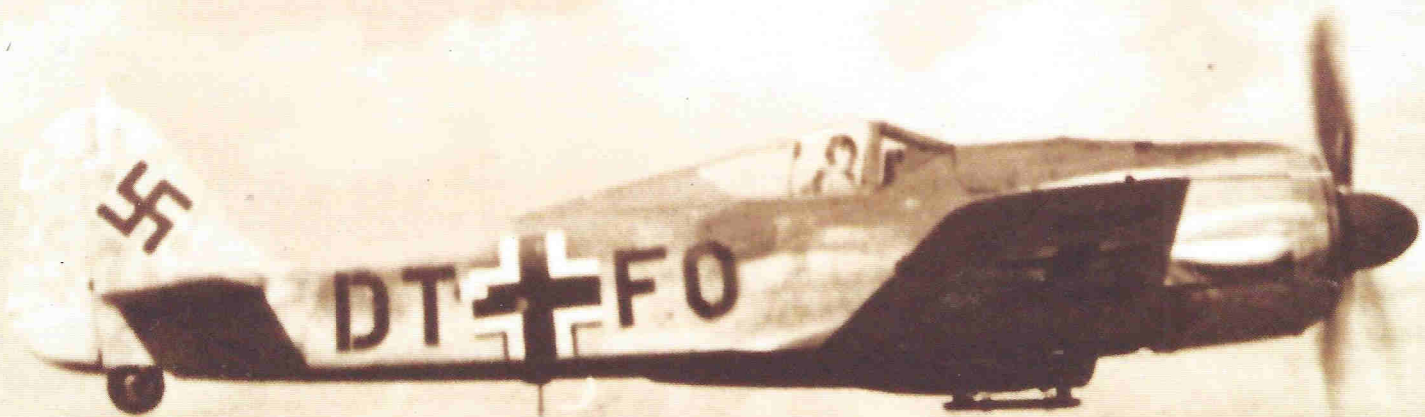
Oberfeldwebel (Ofw) Heinz Bierwith of 5./JG 26 was killed instantly. Such raids

would continue sporadically, but far more Fw 190s would be seen over Britain engaged on other types of missions.

## FIGHTER-BOMBER SORTIES

Fitting bombs to fighters was introduced in the Battle of Britain, but by 1941, interest in Jagdbomber or Jabo (fighter-bomber) missions had become secondary and only then against shipping. However, Oblt Frank Liesendahl of JG 2 convinced the Luftwaffe to form a dedicated Jabostaffel flying the Bf 109F, the first operational mission apparently

**The last seconds of Fw 190 A-5/U8 Wk Nr 1412 coded Blue F of 13./SKG 10 on May 30, 1943. Lt Hermann Müller had attacked Torquay and was chased by Flt Sgt Brian Calnan of 257 Sqn in a Typhoon all the way to Alderney.**



The bomb rack for a 250kg bomb can be seen under an Fw 190 A-4 from Ergänzungsgruppe/SKG 10.

being flown on December 25, 1941.

Liesendahl experienced success to such an extent that in March 1942, the Jabostaffel became 10.(Jabo)/JG 2, and JG 26 was ordered to form its own 10 Staffel.

In June 1942, both Jabostaffel moved to Le Bourget to convert to the Fw 190. This was worrying for the RAF as the Fw 190 had already proven itself superior in all flight parameters (apart from turning radius) to the Spitfire Vb, being 30mph faster and having the highest rate of roll of any fighter of World War Two. It could also carry a single 500kg or 250kg bomb under the fuselage or four 50kg bombs under the wings, twice the bomb load of a Bf 109F.

The first Fw 190 Jabo attack took place against shipping on July 7, 1942 and from then on, at least one such mission a day was planned, weather and serviceability permitting. Operations now began with virtual impunity due to the raids being flown at speed and at low level, albeit by the end of the month two pilots had been downed by anti-aircraft fire from ships they were attacking. Hptm Frank Liesendahl of 10./JG 2 during off Brixham, Devon, on July 17, 1942 and 10./JG 26's Oblt Hans-Joachim Geburtig off Littlehampton on July 30, 1942. Liesendahl was awarded the Knight's Cross posthumously, whilst Geburtig was captured.

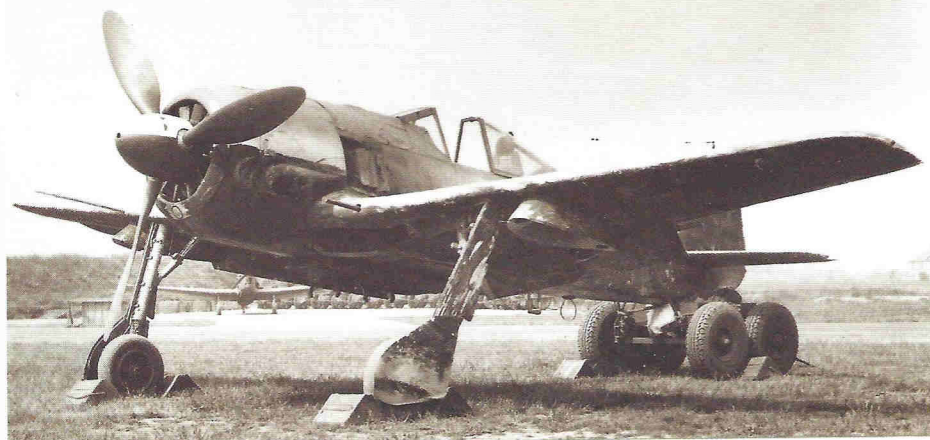
The first Fw 190 Jabo to crash on land occurred on August 26, 1942. Two aircraft of 10./JG 26, flown by Obergefreiter Richard Wittmann and Ofw Werner Kassa, struck industrial sites in Eastbourne, but as Kassa banked away after dropping his bomb, he presented a much better target for a machine gunner on a factory roof. Kassa lost control, continued rolling and hit the ground inverted, being killed instantly.

By the end of 1942, 10./JG 2 had lost three Jabos, of which just one had crashed on land, while 10./JG 26's toll totalled seven,

with two crashing on land. Both units now began switching from attacking shipping and coastal targets to locations more inland, such as Yeovil on August 5, 1942 and Salisbury on August 11, 1942. Another change was marked by a massed vengeance attack (after Bomber Command targeted German cities) against Canterbury on October 31, 1942 with 70% of the bombs landing on target for just one escort fighter claimed by flak. To add insult to injury, two RAF fighters were also shot down. This was the precursor for another vengeance attack on east London on January 20, 1943 by 28 Jabos. Just one Fw 190 of 10./JG 26, flown by Lt Hermann Hoch, was lost to flak on the way home – Hoch being captured.

The British now increased their fighter, balloon and gun defences, as attacks were still being made from as far east as Suffolk,

Below: **Uffz Werner Oehne's Fw 190 A-5/U8 Wk Nr 2596 coded White 6 at RAF Manston. Lost and running low on fuel, he landed at the Kent airfield on June 22, 1943.**



and west to Cornwall. A new Jabo unit, Schnellkampfgeschwader 10 (SKG 10), became operational at the start of March 1943 after which it subsumed 10./JG 2 and 10./JG 26. With nearly 120 Jabos available by mid-April 1943, it came as a great surprise to Luftwaffe pilots and the RAF that the vast majority were to be used for nocturnal raids and, as a result, daylight missions soon declined.

The Luftwaffe's first nocturnal sortie on the night of April 16-17, 1943 was a travesty. Two aircraft were lost during the day caused by technical issues with one pilot killed, then three

Fw 190s collided taking off for the mission causing the death of a second airman, whilst two more suffered take-off accidents. Over Britain, four pilots became disorientated – one was killed when his aircraft ran out of fuel; the remaining three landed or tried to land at RAF West Malling in Kent (1./SKG 10 would land two more Fw 190s at RAF Manston later in the year). A final pilot disappeared – the total cost for the night being ten aircraft destroyed, two damaged, four pilots killed and three captured.

Understandably, there were no more nocturnal actions for a month, whilst in May 1943 there were 12 daylight missions in seven days. However, when Eastbourne was targeted in the early afternoon of June 6, 1943 it represented the last daylight Jabo raid against Britain during the war, the majority of Fw 190s being moved to the Mediterranean a few days later, just leaving 1./SKG 10 to carry out more nocturnal missions, which it did up until the night of June 5, 1944. After D-Day it operated solely over Normandy. Its

effectiveness was questionable as its last commander, Hptm Kurt Dahlmann, later wrote: "The night operations of the Fw 190 were not successful. It was a real makeshift solution. The type of aircraft used was neither envisaged or suitable for the purpose..." With only one crewmember the Fw 190 was not suited to night operations

due to the high workload on the pilot.

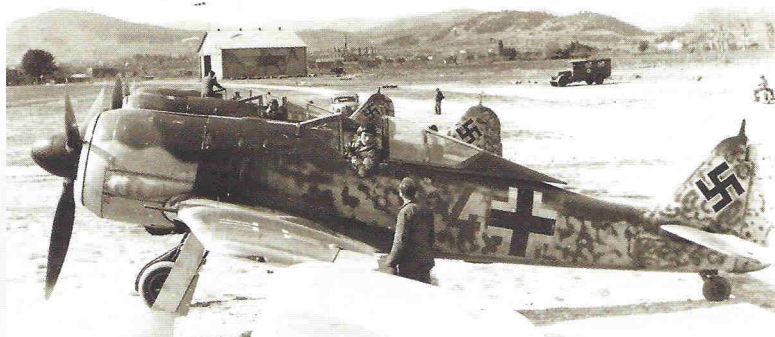
Fifty-four Fw 190 pilots were killed and seven became POWs between April 16, 1943 and June 6, 1944, the last loss being Fw Otto Heinrich of 3 Staffel, who was believed shot down by flak off Portsmouth on May 22, 1944 and who received the Knight's Cross posthumously.

## RECCE MISSIONS

Luftwaffe reconnaissance missions were normally carried out by twin-engined aircraft, but from as early as July 1941, 1 Staffel ►

(Fern)/Aufklärungsgruppe 123 (1.[F]/123) had in the region of five Bf 109s for this role in addition to the usual Ju 88s. As the year progressed, the Fw 190-equipped 3.(F)/123, 4.(F)/123 and 1.(F)/122 began flying limited missions over Britain, but on December 19, 1942, 3.(F)/122 reported the first loss of an Fw 190A-3 when Fw Paul Gellert was shot down 30 miles (48km) south of Shoreham by a 486 Sqn Typhoon.

By 1943, both 4 and 5.(F)/123 (formed in November 1942) reported having a few Fw 190s on strength, but the only recorded combat loss of an Fw 190 was from 5.(F)/123 on March 13, 1943 when Fw Oskar Sahre was shot down and killed by a Typhoon of 1 Sqn off Beachy Head. However, the major user of the Fw 190 for reconnaissance over Britain was Nahaufklärungsgruppe 13 (NAG



**Above: The bulge for the camera is just visible under the Red 4 code on the fuselage of Fw 190 A-4 from 2./NAGr 13. The unit operated over the west of Britain from bases in Brittany for nearly 18 months.**

**Below: 'Butcher Bird' A-5/U8 was captured on April 17, 1943 and wears RAF colours plus serial PE882. The aircraft's capabilities were tested though it was lost in an accident on October 13, 1944 while being operated by 1426 (Enemy Aircraft) Flight at RAF Collyweston, Northamptonshire.**

13) which was formed late in 1942. It consisted of 1 and 2 Staffel (3 Staffel was not formed until spring 1944, too late to operate over Britain), and its first combat loss, flying from St Brieuc in Brittany, was not until July 30, 1943 when Oblt Rainer Einhardt and Ofw Werner Schröder of 2 Staffel were shot down off Plymouth by Spitfires of 165 Sqn.

Just two more were lost before the end of 1943, the last mention of an Fw 190 being on November 20, 1943 when Uffz Hermann Oettinger of 1 Staffel was wounded off Start Point, Devon, by Spitfires of 610 Sqn. The Fw 190s appear to have focused their attention on mainland Europe after the D-Day landings of June 6, 1944 as after that none are recorded as lost in combat or accidents during operations in British skies. **AN**

