

ALLE ORIGINI DEL SAR

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mostra - convegno:

l' aeronautica militare italiana nel dodecaneso e l'idroscalo g. rossetti

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attività aeree sul mar egeo, 1941-45

-- HANS PETER EISENBACH --

Air Battle west of Rhodes – October 9, 1943

At beginning of October 1943 British naval task forces of cruisers and destroyers executed missions in the Aegean Sea in order to search and destroy German forces, which planned to land on the Dodecanese island of LEROS. However the British strategists misjudged the German Air power and threat represented by the Stukas (Dive Bomber). In July 1943 the Luftwaffe deployed two groups of Stukas to Greece. I. Dive Bomber Wing 3 (I./StG 3) was based in MEGARA west of Athens, II. Dive Bomber Wing 3 (II./StG 3) was deployed to ARGOS on the Peloponnese Peninsula. British military intelligence was not aware of these positions. They assumed the Stukas in Crete and Rhodos. For the battle of Kefalonia I./StG3 deployed in September 1943 to ARAXOS, but redeployed to their main operating base in MEGARA via PARAMITHIA on 27th September 1943. On 1st October 1943 Luftwaffe operational dive bombers in Greece are reported to have 69 Stukas.

After the battle of KOS on 3rd and 4th October¹ these Stukas attacked British warships in the Aegean Sea. The first mission of I./StG3 against the Royal Navy was flown on 6th October. The Stukas started in MEGARA at 10.20 hrs (German A-Time²). After 95 minutes they reached the British surface striking force deep in the Scarpanto Straits. After the heavy and sustained attacks the Stukas of I./StG3 returned to MEGARA where they landed at 13.45A hrs. The next day reconnaissance aircraft discovered again British naval task forces of cruisers and destroyers retiring through the Scarpanto Straits south of RHODOS. Eighteen Ju 87D of Ist StG3 took off on 7th October at 08.10A hrs and followed immediately the warships. At 09.55A hrs they sighted the armada. Then the cruiser and destroyers were attacked and the Stukas badly damaged the cruiser PENELOPE. The Stukas arrived back in MEGARA at 12.15A hrs. During the attack the Stuka with the call-sign S7+OL was shot down by ship guns.

¹ For the Battle of KOS I.StG3 deployed on 2nd October to Kastelli/Crete. They redeployed on 5th October to MEGARA via LEROS, where they attacked the harbour of Lakki/Portolago. The Stukas destroyed three ships – Legnano, MZ 73 and Porto Di Roma.

² C-Time = A-Time + 2 hours. The Germans reported in A-Time and for the British Levant Command, including the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations, C-Time was obligatory. See also: HQ 1st Fighter Group, Office of the Intelligence Officer, Major Clyde W. Gabler, Journal Note, dated 4 October 1943: "Time advanced to 'C' Time. Two hours.

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German Air-sea rescue service could pick up the pilot Wolfgang Wedel and his wireless operator Georg Scheller injured south-west of RHODOS. 48 hours later the Stukas of Ist Group StG3 carried out another lethal strike against the Royal Navy.

A force under H.M.S. CARLISLE (Captain H. F. Nalder, R.N.) carried out a sweep on the nights of 7th / 8th and 8th / 9th October to intercept German forces attempting to reach the Dodecanese from the Piraeus. No sightings were made and in the morning at 05.15 hrs on the 9th the "Credential Force" was heading southeast in order to withdraw through the straits between Scarpanto and Rhodos to Alexandria for refuelling. Strong combat air patrols for the ships were available. Almost continuous fighter cover was provided throughout the morning till 11.55C hrs by 94th, 27th, and 71st Squadron / 1st Fighter Group / 12th US Fighter Wing from GAMBUT / Libya. The fifth formation of Lightning's P-38 arrived this morning over the warships at 11.00C hrs flying at 10.000 feet. The situation seemed to be calm as the aircraft circled over the speeding ships.

But the deadly threat was already on its way - ready to attack. German long-range reconnaissance aircraft sighted the ships in the early morning of 9th October and reported their position. The German Stuka attack planners assessed time, speed and heading of the ships. The conclusion was that the ships will be for the next two hours within the range of the Stukas in MEGARA (I.StG3) and ARGOS (II.StG3) and a successful air attack in the assumed target area south of RHODOS would be possible. The Air Task Order was given immediately and the Stukas in MEGARA reacted promptly.

All 26 serviceable "Doras" of I. Group Stuka Wing 3 lifted off at 08.00 hrs (German A-Time) to attack the British task force consisting of the cruiser H.M.S. Carlisle and destroyers Panther, Petard, Rockwood and the Greek destroyer RHS Miaoulis. After a flight time of 110 minutes, the Ju 87 from I.StG3 passed at 09.50 hrs (German A-Time, 11.50C) the sea area north of the small island of Saria north of Karpathos. Now the distance to the British warships was approximately 16 nautical miles (30 Km). After sighting the British task force the three squadrons of I. StG3 started at 11.55C (09.55A) hrs their final approach to attack the ships.

The pilots in the slow-moving Stukas could not know that just in this moment the US fighters turned away from the British surface striking force heading south-west back to their air base in GAMBUT. Thus there was no air cover by allied fighters to protect the warships which were proceeding south through Scarpanto Strait.

Unaware of their fortune of war and the brief fighter gap of some ten minutes the Stukas arrived at 11.59 hrs overhead the ships without prior warning and commenced their attacks with great accuracy. Just in this moment Chief Petty Officer Frank Forster on HMS Panther went to the Wireless Office to ask the PO Telegraphist if he might switch on the ship's radio to receive the BBC Overseas news. The Telegraphist warned him of the imminent air attack and as Forster made up his way to his action station...the ship's gun opened up. One Stuka after another dived almost vertically to the first and largest target - HMS Carlisle. Evasion manoeuvres were in vain and the Carlisle was soon in trouble.

Bill Sanderson, a Royal Marine Commando, on H.M.S. Carlisle remembers: *"On the ninth of October, the day I shall never forget. It was very hot. They'd just piped up 'hands at messes for rum' - which was twelve o'clock.*

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Out of the blue we heard these planes, then the scream of the dive-bomber. It's incredibly frightening. I looked up and saw this plane that was heading right for me. I dived down onto the gun deck and there was this tremendous explosion and we were banged about. There was confusion all round."

The cruiser got several direct hits and was near-missed by two other bombs and was smoking from the stern. Now the bulk of the Stukas concentrated on HMS Panther. Here is the account of Chief Petty Officer Frank Forster:

"We entered the Aegean through the Dodecanese Islands at first light and all was quiet until mid-day when I left my cruising station (on HMS Panther) and made my way to the Wireless Office to ask the PO Telegraphist if I might switch on the ship's radio to receive the BBC Overseas news. He warned me of an imminent air attack and as I made my way to my action station down below in the switchboard room, the ship's guns opened up and once again we were fighting for our lives. There was a series of heavy explosions which might have been caused by either our guns or enemy bombs and then silence - the ship shuddered but was apparently undamaged, we were still steaming and all electrical power supplies were unaffected. I climbed the ladder to the upper deck to find out what had happened and was told that the cruiser "CARLISLE" had been hit and was moving with difficulty. Our Captain decided to offer a tow and the First Lieutenant was busily engaged in preparing a line. His seamen had very little time to complete the task, because the guns suddenly opened up again and now we were the target for the enemy planes. I ran to my action station and as I looked at the switchboards, there was a very heavy explosion and the ship lurched. This wasn't gunfire and a few seconds later all power failed, the lights went out and the ship began to flood up."

Although the ship guns put up a tremendous barrage the 1540-ton destroyer HMS Panther suffered two direct hits and several near misses almost at once. The explosions were much worse than those of the previous Stuka attack. Her back broken, she sank at 12.05 hrs³ in two separate halves at 35°48' N 27°36' E. 33 sailors were killed. Not later than 10.05 hrs (German A-Time / 12.05 C-Time) the Stukas of I.StG3 had left the target area and landed safely at 11.50 hrs (German A-Time) in Megara. During the attack they only lost one aircraft. Unteroffizier Martens (Pilot) and his wireless operator Oberfeldwebel Kröger with the Ju 87 call-sign S7+AK of 2nd Squadron StG3 were shot down by ship anti air artillery.

In the meantime a new threat was en route. Stukas of II.StG3 from ARGOS were approaching the convoy from northwest. The time over target was scheduled for 10.15A (12.15C) hrs. Simultaneously seven Lightning's of 37th Fighter Squadron from Gambut / Libya under the command of Major William Leverette approached from southwest the island of Karpathos, still 15 miles distant from the British warships.

Too far away and too late to prevent the loss of HMS Panther and the other damage caused by I.StG3 but just in time to counter-attack the *Luftwaffe's* second echelon.

³ David Brown „Warship Losses of WW II“ page 98. Brown mentions, that HMS Panther sunk at 12.05 hrs.

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When the US Fighters reached the convoy, the Stukas just passed north of Saria. Shortly after they were intercepted by the Lightning's.

Major William Leverette reports:

"Our Squadron took off at 10.30 hours. We sighted the British warships at almost exactly noon, approximately fifteen miles east of Cape Valoca on Isle of Scarpanto. I contacted them on their frequency, and was told that they were under attack. I could see that the cruiser was smoking from the stern. During our first orbit around the convoy, while flying a south-westerly course at 8000 feet, Lieutenant Sprinkle called out "Bogeys at one o'clock, slightly high, approaching the convoy from the north-west". We immediately changed course to pass behind the bogeys and began a gradual climb. Shortly thereafter, we identified the bogeys as Ju-87s, in three flights, totalling approximately twenty-five.

We attacked the Ju-87s at about 1215. In the dog fights, lasting approximately fifteen minutes, fifteen JU-87s (and one JU-88) were shot from the skies by the attacking Flight and the top cover had accounted for another JU-87 which brought the grand total to seventeen. We engaged the Ju 87s until they passed over the south coast of Rhodos at approximately 1230 hours. "

On the approach of the Lightings the Stukas of IInd StG3 jettisoned their bombs and diverted for the lower tip of Rhodos Island while they were attacked by the fighters. The *Luftwaffe* lost in fact less than 17 Ju 87. German sources confirm a minimum of 6 Stukas and one Ju 88 shot down by the fighter attack. H.M.S. CARLISLE was towed to Alexandria by ROCKWOOD. One officer and nineteen sailors were killed and seventeen men wounded. H.M.S. CARLISLE was written off as a total loss. I. StG3 operated during the whole battle for LEROS from their air base in MEGARE. The last mission in Greece was flown on 17th November 1943. The target was the island of SAMOS. The defenders had only few heavy machine guns, so the air strike was carried out almost undisturbed. The air strike caused very heavy damages to military and civilian population, buildings and infrastructures.

On 25th November I.StG3, now renamed I. Schlachtgeschwader 3 (I. SchG 3) deployed via SKOPJE, MOSTAR, SARAJEWO, MARKERSDORF and WERTHEIM to DORPAT (Estonia) where the Group arrived on 27th February 1944.

The author of this summary is also the author of the book "Fronteinsätze eines Stuka-Fliegers" Helios-Verlag Germany, ISBN 978-3-938208-96-0

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