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[here](http://www.slideshare.net/frontfel/the-greatest-fighter-pilot-of-world-war-2).

Eric Hartmann - Fighter Ace

The top Air Ace of all time was Erich Hartmann. In almost three years, Erich Hartmann accumulated an incredible 352 aerial victories. Hartmann was born 19 April 1922, in Weissach. At age 19, he joined the Luftwaffe and was posted to the Eastern front in Jagdgeschwader 52 in October 1942. He scored his first kill in November and his second three months later.

Operation Citadel

However during Operation Citadel, the greatest tank battle in history, the battle of Kursk, which began on 5 July 1943, Hartmann's score began to mount. His staffel was assigned to protect the Wehrmacht's Panzers from Soviet Il-2 Sturmoviks ♦ armoured, tank-busting aircraft armed with twin 37mm cannon.

The Battle of Kursk

Flying a ME.109, Hartmann took off on the morning of 7 July, as the sun rose in Northern Ukraine at 3am. Adler, the German forward spotting post, radioed through a report of a group of between ten to twenty Russian aircraft heading West. Hartmann gained altitude and spotting the Sturmoviks, he ordered an attack.

Sturmoviks

With its armour and rear-gunner, the Sturmovik was a tough target. Hartmann dived below, picked up airspeed then banked around and came up behind and underneath the Il-2s aiming for the ventral oil radiator. He closed to one hundred meters before firing. As blue flames and black sooty smoke streamed from the Sturmoviks radiator, he had scored his 22nd victory of the war. As the Russian formation began to break up, he targeted another Il-2. At 150m he opened fire and more blue flame and black smoke poured from his 23rd air victory.

Before Breakfast

He landed at 4am and was scrambled back into the air at 5:50, where he downed another Sturmovik and a LaGG-3 fighter. That made 4 victories before breakfast.

Dogfight

Later that afternoon he led his staffel up again and engaged in a sprawling dogfight with Soviet LaGG-3 fighters. He quickly shot down 3 enemy fighters, making it 7 victories for one day.

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</p> <p>Fighter Ace
By August 1943, he had shot down 50 Soviet aircraft. Before the end of the year he had downed 148 Soviet aircraft and earned his Knights Cross.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Shot Down
He was shot down and captured, 12 August 1943. During the monumental tank battle of Kursk, Hartmann shot down 32 sturmoviks before being himself hit. He crash landed, and removed the precious clock of the ME-BF109, before being captured by Russian infantry. He managed to jump out of a moving truck and plunged into a field of tall sunflower plants with bullets whining overhead. Hartmann successfully made his way back to the German lines.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Highly Decorated
By 2 March 1944, he had reached a total of 202, earning him the Oak leaves. He was awarded the 3rd Reich's highest military decoration: The Knights Cross to the Iron Cross, with Oak leaves and Swords with Diamonds. This was only awarded to 27 soldiers throughout WWII, 12 of whom were Luftwaffe pilots.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Downfall
At the end of WWII, in May 1945, his commander ordered Major Hartman, then Gruppen Kommandeur of the famous JG52, to fly to the British sector. He disregarded this order because he felt responsible for his squadron's pilots, ground crew and family members. They destroyed the units♦ aircraft and then moved on foot into Bavaria which was occupied by US forces.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Captured
However, a week after surrendering to American forces, they were delivered across the border to the Red Army. Hartmann was sentenced to 50 years hard labour as a slave in Siberia.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Steadfast
The Soviets placed enormous pressure on him to build up an East German Air Force. Hartmann refused and did not return to Germany until 1955, when, with the establishment of diplomatic relations between West Germany and the Soviet Union, the last German POW's were released.</p> <p>
</p> <p>New Beginnings
In 1956, Hartmann joined the newly established West German Luftwaffe and worked at building up new fighter units. In 1959, he became the first Commander of Jagdgeschwader 71 ("Richthofen" Squadron). Eric Hartmann's story is told in The Blonde Knight of Germany.</p> <p></p> <p>Dr. Peter Hammond
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</p> <p>See also:
The Best of Enemies
How Propaganda Changes Perceptions and People
The Causes, Consequences and Catastrophe of the First World War
The Bombing of Cities in WWII
The Katyn Forest Massacre</p>