

History According to Hollywood
From the hundreds of films made by Hollywood on the Second World War, you could be forgiven for getting the impression that the Allies had the greatest soldiers, airmen and seamen of all time.

Fictional Victories
You would also get the impression from Hollywood that the Allies achieved stupendous victories against overwhelming odds.

Facts are Stubborn Things
However, the facts are that the German Wehrmacht was almost always outnumbered by the Allies and very inadequately supplied. Yet they produced the top tank commanders, commandos and paratroopers of the war. The Luftwaffe, despite being outnumbered on every front and starved of fuel and supplies, produced the top air Aces of all time.

Outnumbered
At the start of WWII, well over 4 million Polish, French and British soldiers confronted just over 2 million German soldiers. However the German army was far better trained.

The Polish Campaign
On paper, Poland's 600,000 standing army could swell to 2.5 million men in uniform. In fact the Polish Army outnumbered the German Army at the beginning of September 1939. Poland had concentrated most of its 30 divisions in an offensive forward position, close to the German frontier.

Blitzkrieg
Within the first three days of the campaign 1-3 September 1939, the Luftwaffe destroyed the Polish Air Force. The German Army used its Blitzkrieg tactics to punch through the Polish divisions encircling them and cutting off their supply lines.

The Western Front
On the Western front on the eve of 10 May, 1940, the German Army confronted a superior force of French, British and Belgian troops. The impression given by propaganda and Hollywood films, is that the Germans had an overwhelming superiority in tanks and aircraft.

On the Ground
In fact, the Allies had 3,124 tanks as against 2,580 for the Germans. In addition, the Allied tanks had thicker armour and heavier weapons mounted on their tanks. However, as the Allies tended to deploy their tanks as infantry support weapons, the German Panzer formations broke through and encircled the Allied forces

with breath-taking speed.

War in the Air

The Allied planes were roughly equal to the number of aircraft in the Luftwaffe. However, while the British Spitfire was superior, most of the French Air Force aircraft were hopelessly out-classed by the German Messerschmidts.

War at Sea

The Germany Navy, the Kriegsmarine, was completely unprepared for war. Only 25 U-boats were fitted for Atlantic service at the onset of WWII. Britain had far more submarines than Germany had! Of course in terms of battleships, aircraft carriers, destroyers, etc., nothing could match the Royal Navy.

The Largest Conflict in History

At the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, 22 June 1941, Germany faced a Soviet Army of 5,774,000. The Soviet Union had 316 divisions, 117,600 artillery pieces, 25,700 tanks and 18,700 combat aircraft. The German Wehrmacht at this time had 5,200 tanks, of which only 3,350 were committed to the Eastern front. This gave the Soviets a 4 to 1 advantage in armour. The Luftwaffe had just over 4,000 aircraft to oppose the 18,700 aircraft in the Soviet Air Force. The Soviets therefore had an over 4 to 1 advantage in aircraft too.

Operation Barbarossa

Operation Barbarossa was the largest military operation ever launched to that date. It was fought over a 2,900 km front and involved 600,000 motor vehicles and 750,000 horses for the German and European volunteers of this operation to liberate Russia from communism and end the Soviet threat to Europe.

Unprecedented

In the first day, one-quarter of the Soviet Union's Air Force was destroyed. The German Blitzkrieg tactics devastated the Red Army and made stupendous progress. By October, over 3 million Red Army soldiers had been taken as Prisoners of War.

Logistical Nightmare

However, the further the Wehrmacht advanced into Russia, the more their logistical complications were compounded. The Russian infrastructure was primitive. Their dirt roads turned to mud. To supply the frontline troops became an increasingly impossible assignment. Yet the Wehrmacht was winning and the Red Army was in full retreat.

American Industry Bolstered the Soviet Union

What no one had anticipated was the vast amount of aid which the United States of

America would give to the Soviet Union. Even before America entered WWII officially, vast quantities of military hardware began being flown via Alaska, shipped via Murmansk, and trucked through Persia, into Russia.

Gifts to Stalin

An official list of military hardware supplied by the USA to the USSR from 1941, includes: 7,056 tanks; 14,795 military aircraft; 51,503 jeeps; 375,883 trucks; 35,170 motorcycles; 8,071 tractors; 8,218 artillery pieces; 131,633 machine guns; 345,735 tonnes of explosives; 1,981 locomotives; 90 cargo ships; 4,478,000 tonnes of food supplies; \$1,078,965,000 of machines and equipment; 2,670,000 tonnes of petroleum products; 49,860 tonnes of leather; 3,786,000 tyres; 15,417,000 pairs of army boots; 106,893,000 tonnes of cotton; building equipment valued at \$10,000,910,000; non-iron metals 802,000 tonnes; along with 29 tankers; 433 combat ships, as well as mobile bridges, railroad equipment, aircraft radio equipment and many other invaluable items.

British and Canadian Aid to the USSR

This does not include the very generous aid given by Great Britain to the Soviet Union. Britain supplied: 5,800 aircraft, 4,292 tanks and 12 minesweepers. Canada supplied the Soviet Union with 1,188 tanks, 842 armoured cars, a million shells and 208,000 tonnes of wheat and flour. There is no doubt that without Western aid, the Soviet Union wouldn't have been able to survive a year. In fact only massive influences of aid from the West kept the rotten, corrupt and unworkable communist regimes in power throughout the Cold War. Only when Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl turned off the taps and curtailed Western aid for the Soviet block in the 1980s did the Iron Curtain finally come crashing down.

Many Stories Waiting to be Told

One wonders why no Hollywood film seem to have focused on the largest military offensive in the history of warfare, some of the largest battles in history, and some of the greatest Air Aces and Tank Commanders, which came out of that colossal conflict.

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.

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<p>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.</p> <p>
</p> <p>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.</p> <p>
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<p>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.</p>
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<p>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.</p> <p>
</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>

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.

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.

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.

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.

Hans-Ulrich Rudel - Stuka Ace
The greatest tank destroyer in history has to be Hans-Ulrich Rudel of the Luftwaffe. He destroyed 519 Soviet tanks. Hans-Ulrich Rudel was born in Silesia in 1916, the son of a clergyman. He excelled in sports and, in 1936 he joined the Luftwaffe as a Cadet officer.

Poland
He served as a reconnaissance observer during the Polish campaign in September 1939. In 1940, he was admitted to the Stuka (Sturzkampfflugzeug-dive bomber) training course near Stuttgart.

Crete
Rudel took part in the airborne invasion of Crete, May 1941.

Russia
On 23 June 1941 at 3am, he flew his first combat dive-bombing mission into the Soviet Union as part of Operation Barbarossa. In the next 18 hours, he flew 4 combat missions.

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</p> <p>Battleship Marat
On 23 September 1941, Rudel's Air Wing attacked the Soviet fleet in the Leningrad area. During this attack Rudel sunk the Soviet battleship Marat, with a single 1,000kg bomb hitting its ammunition store and breaking the ship in half.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Decorations
On Christmas, 1941 Rudel flew his 500th mission and on 30 December, 1941 he was awarded the German Cross in gold, by General Freiherr Wolfram von Richthofen (a cousin of the great WWI Air Ace).</p> <p>
</p> <p>Stalingrad
Hans Rudel was then sent to Graz to train new Stuka crews. On his own request he was returned to the Eastern front in June 1942, and received command of the 1st Staffel of the 1st Wing of Stukageschwader 2, operating in the Stalingrad area.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Sinking Ships
On 10 February 1943, Hans Rudel flew his 1,000th mission and was posted to the newly formed "Panzerjagdkommando Weiss". The modified Stukas were armed with two 37mm canons, one under each wing, with just 6 rounds of ammunition. In the space of three weeks, Rudel destroyed 70 Soviet boats in the Black Sea.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Destroying Tanks
In March 1943, during a tank battle at Belgorod, Rudel knocked out his first tank with the prototype tank-busting Stuka. "The tank exploded like a bomb◆ bits of it crashing down behind us."</p> <p>
</p> <p>Tank Busting
These Ju-87 G-1s were nicknamed Panzerknacker (Tank Buster or Kanonenvogel - Cannon Bird). In April 1943, Hans Rudel was awarded Oak leaves to his Knights Cross and his squadron of tank busting Ju-87 G-1s were assigned to support the German Panzers during Operation Citadel in the battle of Kursk.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Kursk
On the first day of the battle, Rudel knocked out 4 Soviet tanks and by evening his score had grown to 12: "We were all seized with a kind of passion for the chase from the glorious feeling of having saved so much German blood with every Soviet tank destroyed."</p> <p>
</p> <p>Tactical Innovation
Rudel developed new tactics for Panzerstaffels, finding that the best way to knock out Russian T-34s was from the rear, as their mounted engine and

cooling system did not permit the insulation of heavy armour plating at the back.

Behind Enemy Lines

In March 1944, he flew his 1,500th mission and was promoted to the rank of Major. During a mission behind the lines, one of his squadron was shot down and crash-landed. Rudel decided to land to rescue his comrades in enemy territory. But after landing, he realised that because of the soft ground they would be unable to take off. They were forced to escape on foot towards German lines while being pursued by Russians. Rudel had to swim 600m in ice-cold water of the Dniester River.

Highest Awards

On 29 March 1944, Major Hans-Ulrich Rudel was awarded Diamonds to his Knights Cross, with Oak leaves and Swords, the highest German Military award.

Wounded

In November 1944, while flying near Budapest, he was shot in the thigh, yet returned to service only a few days later with his leg in a plaster cast.

Unique

On 1 January 1945, Rudel was awarded the Knights Cross with Golden Oak leaves, Swords and Diamonds. He was the only recipient of this award which was especially created for him.

Amputation

In February 1945, Rudel was seriously wounded and his right thigh was shattered by anti-aircraft fire near Lebus. He managed to land in German held territory and was quickly taken to a field hospital where his leg was amputated. In Berlin he had an artificial limb fitted and returned to his Squadron.

Captured

On 8 May 1945, when Germany surrendered, Colonel Hans Rudel flew his last mission from Bohemia to escape capture by the Soviets. He was interrogated first in England and then in France and eventually returned to Bavaria.

Unprecedented

During his career in the Luftwaffe, Rudel flew over 2,530 missions, shot down 11 enemy aircraft, destroyed 519 Soviet tanks, 150 artillery pieces, 70 boats, over 1,000 military vehicles, 2 LAGG-3 fighters, an Il-2 Stormovik and sunk a destroyer, 2 cruisers and the Soviet battleship Marat. Rudel was responsible for such huge losses to the Red Army that Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, placed a one hundred thousand Rubel price on his head.

Firepower
It is calculated that Hans Rudel flew over 600,000 km, using more than 5 million litres of fuel. He dropped over a million kilograms of bombs, fired over a million machine gun rounds, 150,000 20mm rounds and over 5,000 37mm rounds.

Outstanding Dedication
Rudel was described as an outstanding pilot who hated to take leave, even sick leave. Even after he lost his leg, he said that he was not depressed since he could still do what he loved, to fly and to destroy the enemy.

Extraordinary Courage
His personal bravery, toughness and unparalleled determination marks him out as one of the most extraordinary pilots in history. Rudel's famous quote was: "Verloren ist nur, wer sich selbst aufgibt" ("Lost are only those, who abandon themselves").

Author
Rudel published two books: *We Frontline Soldiers and our Opinion to the Rearmament of Germany* and *Daggerthrust*. In 1953, he published his War Diary entitled: *Trotzden (Nevertheless)*. In 1985 his diary was published and two of the greatest Allied fighter pilots, Douglas Bader and Pierre Clostermann, wrote warm and positive Forewords to this edition.

Michael Wittmann - Tank Ace
The greatest Tank Ace in history was Michael Wittmann. Born 1914 in Bavaria, he was the second son of a local farmer. In 1934, he joined the Germany Army and in 1936, at age 22, he joined the Waffen SS.

Action
He participated in the occupation of Austria in the Sudetenland with an armoured car platoon. Wittmann's first experience of action came in the Polish Campaign of 1939.

France
In the Battle of France he was a commander of a self-propelled assault gun, the *Sturmgeschutz 111*.

Greece
During the Greek campaign of April 1941, he helped capture Athens as part of the 9th Panzer Division.

Russia
His unit participated in

Operation Barbarossa and he served as a Commander of a Stug113 Assault Gun. During the winter of 1942 ♦ 1943, he was assigned for training and returned to the Eastern Front as a newly commissioned officer with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant.

Kursk

At the Battle of Kursk (Operation Citadel), he was commanding a Tiger tank. During the battle he survived a collision with a T-34 which was destroyed when its ammunition exploded. During the battle of Kursk, Wittmann destroyed at least 30 Soviet tanks. On one day, 21 November 1943, he destroyed 13 T-34s.

Tank Destroyer

By January 1944, he had destroyed 88 enemy tanks and was awarded the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak leaves.

Normandy

In April 1944, his Tiger company was transferred to the Western Front. Following the Allied Invasion of Normandy, he was ordered to move up from Beauvais to Normandy. This took 5 days to complete. By this time a 12 km gap had opened up in the German lines, under relentless Allied bombardment.

Villers-Bocage

Anticipating its importance, the British were reassigned to the high ground near Villers-Bocage. Wittmann positioned his company near the town. The British 7th Armoured division was ordered to exploit the gap in the German lines and capture Villers-Bocage. Wittmann at this stage, had only 5 tanks, of which 2 were damaged.

Bold as a Lion

As Wittmann's Tiger emerged from cover, it engaged the rearmost British tanks on the ridge and destroyed them. Wittmann then moved his Tiger towards Villers-Bocage, destroying several transport vehicles and then engaged a number of light tanks followed by several medium tanks.

Devastating

Under continuous fire, Wittmann destroyed another British tank, a self-propelled gun, a scout car and a half-track. He then duelled against a Sherman firefly. In less than 15 minutes, Wittmann's Tiger tank destroyed 14 Allied tanks, 2 anti-tank guns and 15 transport vehicles.

Awards

For his actions during this incredible battle, Wittmann was promoted to Captain and awarded Swords to his Knights Cross of the Iron Cross.

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<p>Facts Are Stranger than Fiction
There are literally thousands of other examples of extraordinary heroism and achievements of German forces during WWII, but one wouldn't tend to know that from Hollywood films and the average history textbook.</p> <p>
</p> <p>The facts are always stranger than fiction.</p> <p>
</p> <p>Dr. Peter Hammond</p> <p>The Reformation Society
P.O. Box 74 Newlands 7725
Cape Town South Africa
Tel: 021-689-4480
Fax: 021-685-5884
Email: mission@frontline.org.za
Website: www.ReformationSA.org</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> <p>
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