

GAF ATTACK FORMATIONS

More Details on the "Company Front"
Provided by a Captured Pilot from JG 3

FURTHER information concerning the "Company Front" tactics of German fighter formations against USAAF bombers has been received from interrogation of an enthusiastic and possibly capable FW-190 pilot shot down during the New Year's Day strafing attacks on Allied bases in Belgium and Holland. This flyer had been a member of IV/JG 3, and had taken part in eight operations against American heavy bombers between the middle of August and the middle of November.

His discourse dealt principally with the role and tactics of the attack fighters (*Sturmgruppe*) as outlined in the general article on "Company Front" in SUMMARY NO. 61 (pages 5-10). The information that this pilot provided is confined to methods employed by JG 3, but it agrees substantially with the contents of the previous report, and adds many valuable details.

Flying Formation: After assembly the FW-190 attack group of JG 3 flies in two stacked-down Vics each of from 8-12 aircraft, the second Vic being 450-600 feet behind and about 150 feet below the leading one.

Theoretically all three Me-109 Gruppen of JG 3 were to provide escort but in practice only two Gruppen flew. (This may have been due to the known fact that one of the Me-109 Gruppen of JG 3 was non-operational at the time). These two Gruppen were split up to form three escort groups—one for top cover and two for close escort.

Each of these three escort groups consists of from 12-24 Me-109s flying in elements of four in level Vic formations.

The formation is sufficiently loose to avoid slipstream and allow the aircraft to "ess" without danger of collision.

Top cover escort group flies about 3,000 feet above the rearmost aircraft of the second FW-190 Vic and the two lateral cover escort groups fly in line with and to the right and left of the FW-190s at from 0-1,500 feet above them.

Aircraft of all three escort groups "ess" continuously with but little variation in height and in consequence the positions of the three escort groups in relation to each other and to the FW-190 attack group vary, but the relative heights remain almost constant. Thus the formation flown by JG 3 on the way to attack the bomber stream and carry out a "Company Front" attack closely resembles that of JG 4 as described in the previous article, except that the number of aircraft is comparatively less, there are two instead of three Vics of FW-190s and the formation flown is somewhat tighter.

The leader of the entire Geschwader formation flies with his deputy at the apex of the leading Vic in the FW-190 attack group.

FW-190 Attack Group Tactics: Most favorable position at which to begin moving from Vic to line-abreast formation preparatory to delivering the "Company Front" attack is about 300-500 feet above and from 3,000 to 5,000 feet behind the bomber group selected as target.

If the interval between the bomber group selected for attack and the succeeding group in the bomber stream is fairly large, no difficulty is experienced in edging in gradually to gain position for the attack, but if the bomber groups are flying fairly close behind each other a very tight turn is necessary, which demands the undivided attention of the FW-190 pilots.

As soon as the FW-190s are in a position to attack, the leader gives the order over the FuGe 16 by employing the code word "*Pauke, Pauke*," as previously reported, or alternatively "*Herride*." A recently-captured prisoner of JG 4 has stated that the code word "*Sturm*" is used for this purpose. Simultaneously, directions for re-assembly after the attack are conveyed by adding the words "*Versammeln rechts [links]*" ("Re-assemble to the right [left]"). On receiving the order to attack, the two waves of FW-190s move from Vic to line-abreast formation.

The final approach is invariably made from slightly above or on a level with the bomber group, and this applies equally to the actual attack. Contrary to the statement made in respect to JG 4 tactics in the previous article, the attack group of JG 3 never dived below and nosed-up to attack.

Each pilot singles out a bomber for attack, and when range has been closed to about 400 yards opens fire with his two MG 151s, usually by directing short bursts at the tail gunner. When he has closed to about 200 yards, the two MK-108 (30 mm.) cannon are brought into play, and all four guns are then aimed at either of the inboard engines of the bomber.

According to the prisoner, the reasons for withholding use of the 30 mm. cannon until range has been closed to 200 yards are:

- (a) Relatively small quantity of ammunition available for the 30 mm. cannon.
- (b) The 20 mm. guns are considered adequate for the tail gunner's armor.
- (c) The 30 mm. cannon are more difficult to aim, and therefore less effective against so small a target as the tail gunner.

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Should the FW-190 pilot find that the bomber he has selected for attack has been set on fire or disabled by one of his brother pilots, he will pass on into the formation and attack another bomber.

The prisoner's own method of breaking off after engagement was to discontinue combat when within about 50 yards of the bomber attacked and sideslip away in the direction of the re-assembly area, on the ground that this was the quickest means of getting clear, and that in the process his aircraft presented a less vulnerable target for the bomber gunners. Other pilots of his Gruppe prefer to break away after passing their bomber, and yet others pass on further through the formation before slipping out.

Should the bomber formation selected for attack comprise less than about 30 bombers, the second FW-190 Vic may break away to attack another formation to one side.

The prisoner had heard that in the course of one operation on which he did not fly, the first FW-190 Vic attacked the bomber formation and the second Vic passed above the first and attacked bombers farther ahead in the same formation.

As in the case of JG 4, the Me-109 escort groups of JG 3 follow the FW-190s in to attack if no Allied fighters are present.

Assembly After Attack : After the attack the FW-190s and their Me-109 escort cover pass below and to the predesignated side of the bomber stream where they circle and re-form. The FW-190s usually assemble at about 1,000 yards below the altitude at which they delivered their attack and the Me-109 escort groups take up their original position in relation to the FW-190s.

It is the practice to re-form on the same side of the bomber stream as that from which the original entry into the stream was made, unless Allied fighters are in a position from which they can more easily attack on this side. The reason for re-assembling on the side of entry is to avoid having to pass through or under the bomber stream and thereby delay reforming and possibly run greater risk of attack by Allied fighters.

Return to Base : After carrying out the attack the aircraft return to base in the same formation as that flown on the way to the bomber stream. If, however, the FW-190 attack group is forced to return unescorted, it flies in elements of four in Vic formation.

Tactics When Intercepted by Fighters : On some of the "Defense of the Reich" operations flown by the prisoner, the JG 3 formation was intercepted by Allied fighters before the bomber stream had been sighted. In some of these instances, the formation was broken up, and in one case the FW-190s flew on unescorted and attacked the bomber group.

Orders were that in the event of interception the FW-190 attack group should continue flying in

formation, leaving the escort groups to deal with the Allied fighters. In practice, however, several Allied fighters—usually P-51s—dived through the Me-109 top cover escort group, and after gaining position on the tails of the FW-190s began shooting them down at will. This led to heavy losses, particularly in the rearmost FW-190 Vic, and caused the pilots to waver and resort to evasive action. In cases where comparatively large numbers of Allied fighters got behind the FW-190s, the latter broke formation completely and after diving away singly or in small elements, headed for base. The prisoner maintained that due to their heavy armor and armament, the FW-190s were faster than the Mustangs in a dive.

When the Me-109 top cover escort group was attacked by Allied fighters, the two lateral escort groups usually climbed to the aid of the top cover group, leaving the FW-190 attack group to fly on alone.

Comments On Allied Gunnery : On each of the two occasions on which the prisoner took part in attacks on B-17 formations, the USAAF air gunners opened fire at 1,000 yards' range. Such fire, he said, was inaccurate and utterly ineffective.

Contrary to the views expressed by the Me-109 pilots of JG 4 as reported in the previous article, this prisoner was of the opinion that air gunners should withhold their fire until the FW-190s come within a range of about 600 yards, claiming that in doing so they would tend to reduce the chance of jamming their guns and would achieve greater accuracy.

He stated that FW-190 pilots are most apprehensive of the fire from the top turret and waist gunners of Fortresses other than the one they are attacking, since in spite of the additional armor fitted they are more vulnerable to attack from the side than from head-on. (For a report on armor and armament of the FW-190s of JG 4, see page 15.)

The prisoner had no first-hand knowledge of B-24s, but he and other pilots of his Gruppe had been informed that Liberators are likely to burn more easily than Fortresses, and had been warned that the top turret gunner of the Liberator is dangerous by reason of his ability to fire rearward between the twin rudders.

The prisoner had had no experience with "head-light" tracer; he presumed that its demoralizing effect would be confined to new pilots.

Vulnerability of GAF Formations : The prisoner was of the opinion that the GAF fighter formation, including both the attack group and the three escort groups, is most susceptible to attack by Allied fighters at the following operational stages when flying "Defense of the Reich" missions :

- (a) At takeoff.
- (b) During assembly after takeoff.
- (c) While turning into the bomber stream, when the FW-190 pilots are concentrating on maintaining formation.



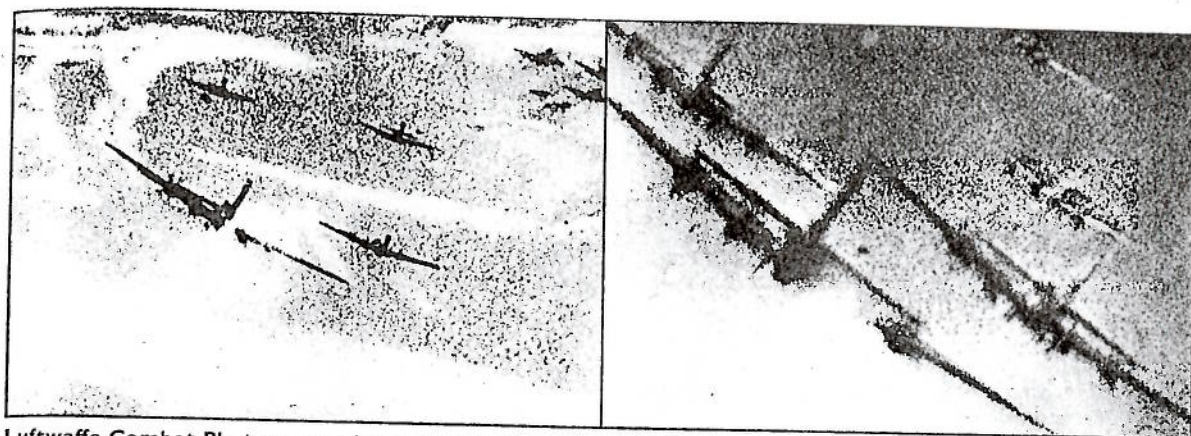
Luftwaffe magazine, unmistakably read "Left, then read their escort,

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Luftwaffe Combat Photos, reproduced from a German magazine, are not of good quality, but the targets are unmistakable. Translated, the captions which accompanied them read in part as follows:

"Left, the four-engine bombers try to curve away toward their escort, whose contrails are visible in the distance . . . range

is 200 meters; right, the bombers dive away [more steeply, and several have already been hit . . . range is 80 meters."

The German PRO and editor did not bother to say that the "steeper dive" of the B-17s was probably due to the fighter pilot's own maneuvering, or that Forts in formation do not "curve away" to pick up their escort.

- (d) During re-assembly after completion of the attack, when pilots must again concentrate on re-forming.

- (e) During landing.

The prisoner made the suggestion that in a case where the Allied fighters were unable to intercept the German formation before it had delivered its attack they should bear in mind the likelihood that the German formation would re-form on the same side of the bomber stream as that from which it

entered. The Allied fighters should, however, maintain a neutral position and refrain from moving towards the anticipated re-assembly area, and thereby disclosing their intentions until the time was ripe for the kill.

If indication is given too soon that the Allied fighters plan to make for the expected re-assembly area the German fighters will be quick to take warning and go through the bomber stream to re-form on the other side.



A Prisoner Discusses Losses in an Me-410 Unit

A FORMER Staffelkapitän of I/JG 6 was among the many GAF pilots captured after the 1 January strafing raids on the Allied fields in Holland and Belgium. He had been in FW-190s only since September, having been with ZG 26, twin-engine Geschwader, through the North African campaign, and later in Italy. By May, 1944, he was stationed at Königsberg/Neumark, from where he led his Staffel against Eighth Air Force bombers on deep penetrations.

On 29 May, his flight received an incorrect comment to the effect that American bombers over Schneidemühl were unescorted. (They were probably B-17s attacking Schneidemühl Airfield as a target of opportunity, after being dispatched on Posen or Krzesinski.) The Me-410s planned to attack the top rear squadron of Forts head-on from a dive. When they encountered the bombers, and were turning for the attack from 3,000 feet above, the four twin-

engine fighters were bounced suddenly by P-51s and three of the four were shot down. The prisoner was able to make a crash-landing safely, but his radioman was killed.

The following day, 30 May, the Staffelkapitän led 13 Me-410s against another B-17 formation, this time in the Magdeburg area. Claims of Eighth Air Force gunners and fighters on that date included an unusually large number of twin-engine aircraft destroyed and damaged, and the prisoner's statements are very much in line with the record, for he admitted that 12 of his 13 Me-410s were lost in the combat which followed his making contact with the bombers just as escorting fighters were being relieved.

The prisoner went on to say that during last Summer, GAF twin-engine fighter units were regularly losing about 50 percent of their strength in every engagement against USAAF bomber formations and their escort.