

THE BLONDE KNIGHT PART 2

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29th March 2019

FEATURE



WORLD WAR TWO ERICH HARTMANN

FOLLOWING LAST MONTH'S INSTALMENT, HOWARD COOK CONCLUDES HIS PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED INTERVIEWS WITH THE WORLD'S HIGHEST-SCORING FIGHTER PILOT, ERICH HARTMANN



Artwork Robert Taylor's stunning painting 'Ace of Aces' depicts Erich Hartmann and his fellow JG 52 pilots over the Eastern Front. It's available as a fine art print from: www.militarygallery.com

Last month's issue featured part one of the 1990-91 interviews I conducted with the most successful ace ever, the Luftwaffe 'Experten' Erich Hartmann. At the time, as a budding warbird pilot, I was embarking on a course of training to progress to more powerful historic aircraft, so I had a particular interest in the instruction Erich received in World War Two. He had flown the Arado Ar 96 advanced trainer, of which there are just two surviving examples, one at Berlin's Deutsches Technikmuseum and the other with Flyhistorisk Museum at Sola, Norway. Erich then moved on to pilot, in his words: "a worn-out Bf 109D at Berlin-Gatow... I was pleased to be in a real fighter at last."

Training fatalities on all sides in conflict are often forgotten. In Erich's case he had two near misses during his instruction phase, and explained: "I was grounded for showing off and buzzing the airfield and during this time another student was killed in the same aircraft. On another sortie I was flying a timed exercise and had to scramble and take off, and then climb to 4,000m. We were then to dive and land, to simulate us scrambling for a combat sortie and landing back at base. I rolled over into a split-s and there was this very loud bang and the '109 went into a spin. I took to my parachute and was tumbling until the parachute opened and I landed okay.

"When I joined the squadron [7./JG 52, in October 1942] I was told the new pilots had to rely on the veterans, even though they could be lower than me in rank. I was lucky [with] my teachers and that I started with 'Paule' Rossmann who was a Feldwebel. Hrabak told me it was experience in the air that counted, and this was much more important than rank on the ground. He also told me it was necessary to work as a team and to stay alive. Hrabak said if we were dead, we were no good to his squadron!

"I was assigned to fly with Rossmann and I was told by [Dietrich] Hrabak that Rossmann was a good leader and he'd never lost a wingman. This was a good lesson to me, that in contact with the enemy to not lose sight or radio contact with my wingman; I was taught that keeping the unit together was the most important thing.

"In my first combat I was an idiot. I left my leader, my attack missed, I was surrounded by Soviets and had to escape. I then ran out of fuel and had to make a belly landing. I did everything wrong and was grounded for three days and had to work with the groundcrews. I learned many lessons. Rossmann spent time with me and told me it is not necessary to go straight in to attack the enemy when you see them. Look at their tactics and the formation, look to see if someone has fallen behind and take him down first. The pilot who can keep his head and thinks, will win.

"I scored my first kill on November 5, 1942. It was a Sturmovik, which was a very difficult aircraft to bring down because of its armour plate. 'Dieter' Hrabak said he never saw an aircraft that could absorb battle damage and still fly as did the Il-2. I used to call it 'The Concrete Bomber' and I always came in fast and closed the distance, then fired and pulled away. I did not want to be hit by pieces flying off my target, but that happened a number of times – including on this first kill when I had to belly land again from the damage. From this I learned to get in close, shoot

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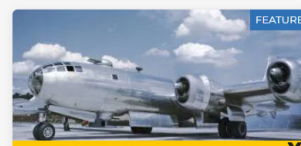
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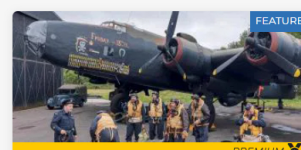
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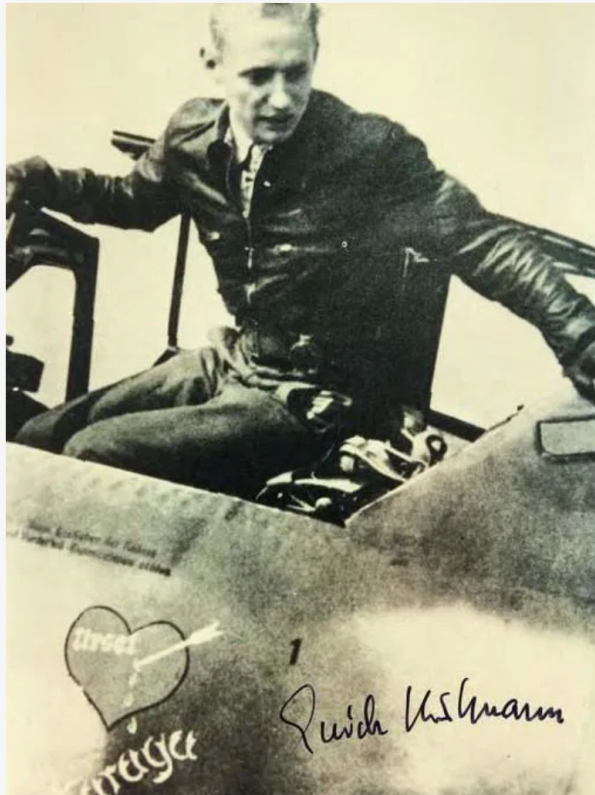
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me to get out again from the danger zone and learned to get in, stop, assess and break away immediately."

Hartmann looked and listened to others' experience in combat and was quick to acknowledge the wisdom passed to him from others. 'Paule' Rossmann taught him to stand off and analyse the situation before going into attack, but this method required marksmanship from long range. Walter Krupinski, with whom he flew as Kaczmarek (wingman), told Hartmann to get his head in the enemy cockpit, to get in close before firing. It was also Krupinski that gave Erich the nickname 'Bubi' (boy or kid). Krupinski told me at his home that he: "Could not believe how young he [Hartmann] looked." Besides assessing the attack, Erich also looked for exactly where to strike, saying: "I was taught by Alfred Grislawski [133 victories] that I should aim for the oil cooler on the Sturmovik. If the oil cooler is shot out, the engine will give up and the Il-2 goes down." The Sturmovik could be dangerous in the air as well as in the ground-attack role. Otto Kittel, the fourth most successful fighter pilot in history with 267 aerial victories, was killed attacking a Sturmovik.



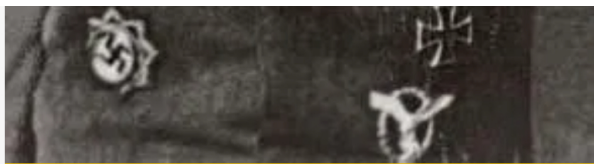
A signed photo of Erich Hartmann from Howard Cook's personal collection. The world's highest-scoring ace is perched in his Bf 109G-6, Werk Nummer 166221, sometime in August 1944.

ALL HOWARD COOK UNLESS STATED

GAINING EXPERIENCE

When he became a fourship section leader in April 1943, Hartmann started to consolidate all this guidance and see what worked best. He explained: "At times there could be only 30 of us against 300 Soviet aircraft and at times up to 600. There were too many targets!" I suggested it was like the Battle of Britain, although lasting for two and a half years rather than a few months. Hartmann continued: "Surviving was the most difficult thing of all. My combat style developed so I could destroy enemy aircraft and then get out and live to fight again."





Oblt Erich Hartmann of 9./JG 52. He wears the Ritterkreuz mit Schwerter (Knight's Cross with Swords) around his neck, awarded on July 2, 1944. Centre-left on his tunic is the Deutsches Kreuz (German Cross) in Gold, which he received on December 6, 1943. He would be awarded the Diamonds to his Knight's Cross on August 25, 1944. CHRIS GOSS



Erich Hartmann's 9./JG 52 Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1', from October 1943, which sports a 121-victory tally on its rudder. At that time the unit flew from Novosaporozyi in Russia. CHRIS GOSS

"I was grounded for showing off and buzzing the airfield and during this time another student was killed in the same aircraft"



While based at Deutsch Brod, Czechoslovakia, in October 1944 Hartmann flew this Bf 109G-14 'White 1' of 6./JG 52. The pilot's black tulip artwork decorates the nose, while the red heart bears his wife Ursula's nickname 'Usch'.

ANDY HAY-2019



Erich Hartmann briefly commanded the first Gruppe (squadron) of Jagdgeschwader 53 at Veszperem, Hungary, in February 1945 and this is his late-format Bf 109G-6 from that time. It wears overall winter whitewash and the pilot's famous black tulip motif on the nose

Erich Hartmann is very well known for his statement about the distance from which he made his attacks: "I didn't open fire till the aircraft filled my whole windscreen." This also ensured that if he was accurate, he would use as little ammunition as possible and have more left for his next combat.

During our conversations at Erich's home in Germany, we spoke about the '109 extensively. His Messerschmitt Bf 109G-6 carried 300 rounds for each of the two 13mm guns and 200 rounds for the 20mm cannon. Erich explained: "I only ever flew the '109G, which was very manoeuvrable, and I found it easy to handle. If I wanted to dive to attack it would gain speed very quickly, which was excellent when running in to make the attack quickly. I started at altitude and came out of the sun if possible." Hartmann believed that 90% of his aerial victories involved the element of surprise and that many of his opponents did not even see him until it was too late. But his considerable success in the air led to doubts from his own side. Over-claiming would not have been tolerated by Hartmann's warweary comrades in JG 52. Erich said: "Other Experten could not believe how I was running up such victories, so a couple of them came up to fly with me. 'Fritz' Obleser was one of them who did not believe at first, but when he saw how I attacked he signed off my four victories for the sortie he flew with me."

When discussing other pilots he flew with, the names of various aviation legends trotted off Erich's tongue: "I flew with Rall, Krupinski, Barkhorn, Grislowski, Graf and Steinhoff – they were the very best." 'Gerd' Barkhorn is the only other pilot with more than 300 victories (301). Hartmann learned many lessons from his compatriots and cited this example: "Krupinski told me the worst thing to do was lose a wingman. None of my wingmen were killed flying with me, and just one was shot down [former bomber pilot Gunther Capito who survived] due to his inexperience in fighter operations."





Before Hartmann became the greatest exponent of the Bf 109, he was trained in the Arado AR 96, shown here.

CHRIS GOSS

"My combat style developed so I could destroy enemy aircraft and then get out and live to fight again."

Among his many missions, Hartmann encountered several types as opponents: "Many of my combats were against Russian-made fighters, like the Yak, MiG and LaGG but we also fought the P-40, and Hurricanes and Spitfires used by the Soviets. The Guards units were their best fighters and were very aggressive. I would look to attack the Russian flight leader, because if he was shot down the rest of the flight would be confused. It looked like they could not think on their own." Erich also preferred to operate in small hunting units: "I had the most success operating in a Rotte or Schwarm, such as near the large Soviet base at Nikopol, which was like a hunting ground for me."

SOLID DOCTRINE

As well as his 'fill the windscreen' advice, Erich Hartmann is well known to air power academics/ practitioners and Luftwaffe history enthusiasts for his doctrine of air tactics and situational awareness: 'see-decide-attack-reverse or coffee break'. To split this into elements, firstly the 'see', in Erich's words: "I always said to my men that the pilot who sees the other pilot first has half a victory." He explained they would get some assistance from ground stations on the radio to advise of enemy attacks coming in "which we would check against our maps in the cockpit". The second part, he said was to decide where the enemy was and whether to attack rapidly or wait for a better situation, or manoeuvre to make his position better... or not to attack at all. He would determine at this time if he had enough altitude or if he was lit up by the sun, giving the enemy the advantage, he would have to move to a better position.

If at an advantage, Hartmann would move in to attack: "If I can control how I prefer to attack it would be [with] full power from below the enemy, so they are lit up in the sun and we can see them clearly." After the attack: "check your six o'clock for a good position to climb out and then reverse." He would climb to a position with the sun behind if possible and then assess again: "have I got the advantage to attack again?" If he hadn't, then this is the 'coffee break' portion of the strategy...to break away and live to fight another day. The late Col John Boyd, USAF, is seen as the doyen of air power strategists and has been a major influence on modern air force thinking. His most famous doctrine – the OODA Loop (observation, orientation, decision and action) does seem to bear more than a passing resemblance to Hartmann's methodology that pre-dated it by 20 years.



'BLACK 6' CHAT

During the course of our conversation, I explained to Erich that 'Black 6' was owned by the Ministry of Defence and operated by volunteers. I showed him photographs of the DB605 and we talked about the work undertaken on the airframe. I explained that to fly 'Black 6' you had to be a serving RAF Officer, and with approximately 200 hours or more on Spitfires. Erich approved of the '200 hours' stipulation because the '109' was so challenging to handle during take-off or landing.

While talking about the artist prints of his aircraft, Erich said he particularly liked Robert Taylor's work. He signed a number of prints for the 'Black 6' team to help towards the aircraft's operation, and through his particular contribution, as I recall, we bought a supply of spark plugs for the DB605.





Hartmann greatly acknowledged the work of Luftwaffe groundcrews (especially his mechanic 'Bimmel' Mertens) on the Eastern Front. As illustrated in this photo, conditions could be austere



The final (352nd) victory achieved by Erich Hartmann was a Soviet Yak fighter on May 8, 1945, while he flew the Bf 109K-4 shown here. The Stab (staff) I/JG 52 aircraft has Erich's trademark black tulip design partially obscured by a yellow identification band. By this time, he had achieved the rank of major.

ANDY HAY-2019

"I was told by Kammhuber that I was not going to be promoted to major general because of politics"

Erich went on to explain that the Eastern Front environment also played its part in hampering flight operations: "It is hard for anyone who has not been there to appreciate how extreme the Russian winter was. We had a Russian prisoner tell us to start a fire under the engine and to keep the oil and engine coolant warm. Another Russian showed us how to start our engines in the extreme below-zero cold... by mixing fuel into the oil crankcase. I thought this was sabotage! The fuel thinned and evaporated, the engine could run, and it worked very well."

TRAINING

The Luftwaffe was having serious problems instructing new fighter pilots to serve across all fronts and replace airmen lost in combat. James Corum's *Why Air Forces Fail* (2006) showed that by 1944, Luftwaffe fighter pilots were being thrown into action having just 100 hours total flying time compared with American fighter pilots with 325-400 hours flight training, which included 125-200 hours in operational aircraft.

Ottomar Kruse of JG 26 told me he was made a flight leader of four aircraft when still a *Nachwuch* (new growth – the nickname for novices) after just four flights. Erich said that when he flew his black tulip-marked '109 that: "the Yaks and LaGCs would avoid me so I gave it to my newer pilots to fly, as it gave them some protection. We had pilots coming to us [with] 20 hours on an He 51 biplane, ten hours on the Ar 96 advanced trainer and 20 hours on the '109 – and then sent to the front. When I started, I had 200 hours before I got to the front and then I flew another 30 hours in the unit before I went into combat."

While working with the Messerschmitt 109 'Black 6', the crew would often hear from enthusiasts that "1,500 Luftwaffe pilots were killed in '109s in training". The actual figure, as near as can be established, of all losses in training is covered in the Barry Kettley and Mark Rolfe book *Luftwaffe Fledglings 1935-1945: Luftwaffe Training Units & their Aircraft*. This says that that between September 1, 1939 and December 31, 1944, 9,521 would-be German airmen had been killed in training, while 5,993 were injured: "The ein hundert neun [109] was not an easy aircraft to fly, especially for the new young pilots who would often ground loop it or flip over."

Hartmann is renowned for giving full credit to his groundcrew, and his crew chief Heinz 'Bimmel' Mertens is possibly the best-known mechanic in the Luftwaffe. "He took great care of me and my aircraft; [maintenance was difficult] because we were moving around so much, and it was hard to get the parts we needed."

When I asked about the day Hartmann recorded his 300th victory he said: "It was August 24, 1944 and I remember I was very tired after 11 victories in three sorties. My crew was listening in on the ground radio. This took me over 300, and when I landed the squadron was waiting for me with warm Champagne and a sign saying congratulations on three hundred victories."

Moving our subject onto jets we spoke about the Me 262. He was invited to fly with Jagdverband 44 (the unit formed to prove the '262 as an interceptor) but said: "they did not fly very much and the aircraft were unreliable, and I wanted to stay with my men in JG 52... I did not want to leave them." We then tackled the subject of the F-104 Starfighter, which he had formally opposed equipping the post-war Luftwaffe: "We had done the right thing with the F-86 Sabre, which was a good aircraft, but not the F-104 as we were not ready for it, and it was useless over 36,000ft. Going to the Starfighter from an F-86 Sabre is like going from a glider to an Me 262." Erich had flown the F-106 Delta Dart and felt it would have been a better choice for the 1960s Luftwaffe, explaining: "We lost so many men in the Starfighter. If I could get millions of dollars for my [Knight's Cross with] Diamonds and Pilot's Badge with Diamonds, I would give \$1 million to the widows of the Starfighter pilots, \$1 million to the Vietnam widows and keep \$1 million". Erich added that, at the time, his medals were in a bank vault in Stuttgart.



Erich Hartmann at his home in Germany around 1990-91, he's seen here with Howard Cook's wife Peta.

Erich Hartmann retired with the rank of colonel in 1970. Of this, Erich stated: "I was told by [General Josef] Kammhuber that I was not going to be promoted to major general because of politics, my having the Diamonds and I also think my not supporting the Starfighter." Opposition to the addition of Diamonds to Hartmann's Knight's Cross is thought to have been prompted by jealousy from some quarters in the 'new' Luftwaffe, as well as being seen by others as a symbol of Nazi Germany.

Our first meeting had been at the time of German unification in 1990, bringing East and West Germany together, and he commented: "It will take time for the East to rebuild. We have worked for 50 years to get to where we are, and it will not happen for the East in five years, which it seems some people are expecting". Probably due to his wartime experiences, and captivity in Russia, Erich was philosophical about the world, and said he wished there was just one language, so everyone could more easily understand each other.

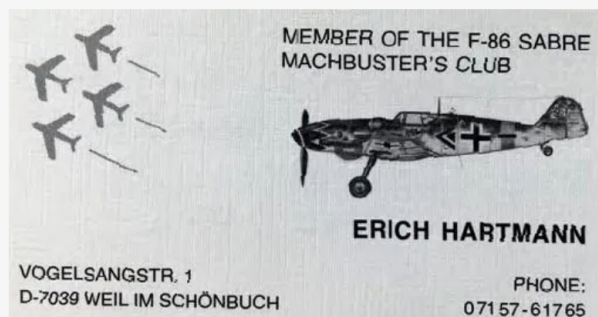
When he asked if I was a military pilot, I explained I was flying vintage aircraft, at the time the Tiger Moth (he enthused: "ah... ein alte Doppeldecker!") and was about to convert to the Harvard (later flying the Spitfire, Hurricane, P-51 and Kittyhawk).

TWILIGHT YEARS

I met with Erich several times throughout 1990-91, and 'Black 6' had made its debut flight during that period. We were talking about the handling of the '109 and its problems on take-off or landing when Erich explained: "We lost many young pilots in the '109 while in Germany, but in Russia it was easier because the runways were wider and longer and we could always land into wind. The take-off is difficult in the einhundert- neun and it is best to give a little bit of gas or it goes all over."

Closing our final meeting, Erich said he was amazed at the level of interest in him in America and the UK, but added: "That was then and what is past is passed."

It was such a huge privilege to spend such valuable, regular, time with Erich Hartmann and I enjoyed every minute. Erich died in 1993 and this is the first time I have published my notes. I often see articles attributing the 'Ace of Aces' title to different pilots, but there is only one. It is Erich Hartmann, undisputed as the most successful fighter pilot of all time.



A business card of Erich Hartmann's, signifying not just his wartime service, but also his membership of the new German Bundesluftwaffe, with which he flew the F-86 Sabre.

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