

Achtung Panzer! - Hans-Ulrich Rudel!

Introduction - What's New - Site Map
Panzer Profiles - Additional Information
Vehicles of the Wehrmacht - Military Links
Bron Pancerna - Forum

Hans-Ulrich Rudel
(July, 1916 - 1982)

Hans Rudel is not the kind of "Panzer Ace" such as Wittmann or Barkmann, simply because he was "Stuka Ace" and destroyed enemy armored fighting vehicles from the air. During his career, as Stuka pilot he managed to destroy enormous number of enemy equipment, including 519 Soviet tanks. Hans-Ulrich Rudel was born in 1916 in Silesia. He was the son of a clergyman - minister. He was never good at school and received limited education. Rudel was a teenager when the NSDAP took charge and became indoctrinated at very early age. Since young age, Rudel showed interest in sports and did not do well in school. In 1936, he joined the Luftwaffe as an cadet officer as a way to continue and develop his sporting activities. After passing his flying training course and becoming a pilot, Hans Rudel applied for further training in the technique of the dive-bombing but was turned down. Instead, he received reconnaissance observer's training and flew long range reconnaissance missions during Polish Campaign in September of 1939 as a Lieutenant. On October 11th of 1939, Rudel was awarded Iron Cross 2nd Class. At the same, Rudel continued applying for Ju-87 Stuka (Sturzkampfflugzeug - dive bomber) training course and was finally admitted in May of 1940. After the completion of the course, Oberleutnant Rudel was posted to Stuka Training Wing near Stuttgart, where he spent the French Campaign. Afterwards, Rudel was transferred to 1st Staffel (1st Squadron) of Stukageschwader 2 (Dive-Bomber Group 2) and took part in the airborne invasion of Crete in May of 1941, although not in the battle zone. In preparations for the Operation Barbarossa, Rudel's Group was transferred to the Eastern Front and on June 23rd of 1941 at 3:00am flew his first combat dive-bombing mission. During next 18 hours, he flew total four combat missions. On July 18th of 1941, Rudel was awarded Iron Cross 1st Class.

On September 23rd of 1941, Rudel's Group (1st and 2nd Wing) attacked elements of the Soviet Baltic Fleet in Kronstadt harbor (Leningrad area). During the attack, Rudel sunk Soviet Battleship "Marat" with 1000kg bomb hitting its ammunition store and breaking the ship in half - "We've got her ... you must have hit her ammunition store...She is blowing up !" (Rudel's rear gunner Scharnovski over the intercom). On Christmas Day, December 24th of 1941, Rudel flew his 500th mission and on December 30th, was decorated with Deutsches Kreuz (German Cross) in Gold by General Freiherr Wolfram von Richthofen himself (who was Manfred von Richthofen's cousin). After that, Hans Rudel was sent to Graz to lecture and train new Stuka crews. On January 15th of 1942, he was awarded with Knights Cross

and eventually returned to the Eastern Front on his own demand in June of 1942. In September of 1942, Rudel received the command of the 1st Staffel of the 1st Wing of Stukageschwader 2 (1StG2), while operating in the Stalingrad area. At that time, his squadron was often sent to attack Soviet tank units, when inadequacy of bombs against tanks was realized.

On February 10th of 1943, Hans Rudel flew his 1000th mission and became a national hero to the German public. Rudel was then posted to the new special "Panzerjagdkommando Weiss" unit formed at Briansk to test newly developed tank-busting version of Ju-87 D-3. Modified Stuka armed with two Rheinmetall-Borsig 37mm (BK) Flak 18 guns (each mounted in special canopy under each wing with 6 rounds of ammunition) was developed at the Luftwaffe's experimental station at Rechlin (near Neustrelitz, Germany). Prototypes were used at first against Soviet landing crafts in the Black Sea and in the space of three weeks, Rudel destroyed 70 such boats. In March of 1943, during a tank battle around Belgorod, Rudel knocked out his first tank with his new tank-busting Stuka - "... my rear gunner who said that the tank exploded like a bomb and he had seen bits of it crashing down behind us." (Hans-Ulrich Rudel). Later on, more Ju-87 D-3s were converted to tank-busters and were designated as Ju-87 G-1 (often nicknamed Panzerknacker - Tank Buster or Kanonenvogel - Cannon Bird) and started arriving on the Eastern Front in October of 1943.

On April 14th of 1943, Hans Rudel was awarded Oakleaves to his Knights Cross. Captain Hans Rudel's squadron of nine tank-busting Ju-87 G-1 was assigned to support of the 3rd SS Panzer Division "Totenkopf". On the first day of the Operation Citadel, during his first mission, Rudel knocked out four Soviet tanks and by the evening, his score grew to twelve. "We are all seized with a kind of passion for the chase from the glorious feeling of having saved much German bloodshed with every tank destroyed." - Hans Rudel. At the same time, because of Rudel's squadron's success, Panzerstaffels (Tank Destroyer Squadrons) were formed. Based on his experiences, Rudel developed new tactics for Panzerstaffels. He found that the best way to knock out tanks was to hit them in the back (T-34's rear mounted engine and its cooling system did not permit the installation of heavier armor plating) or the side. Interesting fact is that attacking the back of the tank meant that the plane had to come from the rear flying towards friendly territory - great advantage if the plane got damaged during the attack.

On October 25th of 1943, Hans Rudel was awarded Swords to his Knights Cross with Oakleaves. In early March of 1944, he flew his 1500th mission and was promoted to the rank of Major. In late March, during a mission, Rudel's squadron was attacked by a squadron of Soviet Lavochkin La-5 fighters. One Stuka was shot down and crash landed with its crew unharmed, Hans Rudel decided to land and rescue his comrades stuck in the enemy territory. He landed and rescued his friends but could not take off because of the soft ground. They were forced to escape on foot towards German lines being chased by the Russians. Rudel and his comrades reached the river Dniestr and swam 600m in the ice cold water and just before reaching the other side, Rudel's rear gunner drowned. Eventually, wounded Rudel was the only one who managed to escape and reached German lines. He then returned to his unit, where he was cheerfully welcomed by his

comrades. On March 29th of 1944, for his bravery, Major Hans-Ulrich Rudel was awarded Diamonds to his Knights Cross with Oakleaves and Swords, the highest German military award. In November of 1944, while flying near Budapest, he was shot in the thigh but returned to service few days later with his leg in a plaster cast. On January 1st of 1945, Rudel was awarded the Knights Cross with Golden Oakleaves, Swords and Diamonds, being the only recipient of this award specially created for him. In February of 1945, Rudel was seriously wounded and his right thigh was shattered by anti-aircraft fire near Lebus (near Frankfurt am der Oder). He managed to land in German held territory and was quickly taken to the field hospital, where his leg was amputated. Rudel was then taken to the hospital in Berlin, where he had an artificial limb fitted and then returned to his squadron. In the last days of the war, Colonel Rudel commanded the oldest and the best known close assault / support Stuka group - Schlachtgeschwader 2 Immelmann. He was still operating with his unit in last days of war on the Eastern Front. At the end of the war, Rudel wanted to fly a suicide attack with his squadron but his superior ordered him not to take off because "he might be needed later", which might have been the only reason why he didn't do so. He also volunteered to fly his Stuka into Berlin in May of 1945 to rescue Hitler from the Red Army. On May 8th of 1945, when Germany surrendered, Colonel Hans Rudel who was in Bohemia, flew his last mission in Ju-87 Stuka. He managed to contact American forces and arranged for himself and other planes to fly over to Kitzingen airfield (near Wurzburg) in the American zone, escaping the capture by the Soviets. Afterwards, Hans Rudel was interrogated first in England and then in France and eventually returned to hospital in Bavaria for convalesce. In 1946, Rudel left the Bavarian hospital and started working as a haulage contractor and in 1948, left for Argentina, where he worked for the State Airplane Works and organized with other escaped Nazis a NSDAP party-like structure.

In 1951, Rudel published two booklets in Buenos Aires, "Wir Frontsoldaten zur Wiederaufrüstung" (We Frontline Soldiers and Our Opinion to Rearmament of Germany) and "Dolchstoß oder Legende" (Daggerthrust or Legend). In the first book, Rudel claims to speak for all frontline soldiers stating that they would fight again against the Bolsheviks and that Germany's "Lebensraum" (Living Space) is in the East. In his second book, Rudel condemns not only all the soldiers who tried to kill Hitler as traitors, but also the staff officers of the Wehrmacht stating that both groups were directly responsible for the defeat. Rudel condemns soldiers because the turmoil caused by the assassination allowed the Allied forces to succeed with the Invasion of Europe, while he condemns the staff officers of the Wehrmacht because they could not see Hitler's genius in warfare and worked silently against him. Those two booklets were followed by some more of similar nature. Hans-Ulrich Rudel eventually returned to Germany in early 1950s and in 1953, published his war diary entitled "Trotzdem" (Nevertheless). There was a discussion in Germany if it should be allowed that his diary was published, because he was known as a Nazi, but in 1953, it was no longer that bad to be a Nazi. Most people wanted to forget, mostly their own part of the story, while some Nazis became politicians and businessmen and the Wirtschaftswunder (The rise of the industry and economy) made the Germans interested in other things. Rudel continued his sporting activities and became a candidate for the Deutsche Reichspartei (DRP) an ultraconservative party but was unsuccessful. The "Stuka Ace" died in Germany in 1982. In 1984, his diary was published again and two of the greatest Allied fighter pilots, Douglas Bader and Pierre Clostermann wrote a warm and praising foreword to this edition, surely being unaware

of Rudel's political activities.

Junkers 87 R-1 Stuka of 2nd Staffel of Stukageschwader 3,
over Trapani, Sicily in 1941.

During his career, Rudel flew over 2530 (around 400 of his sorties were flown in a Focke-Wulf 190 fighter plane during which he was credited with 11 air victories) missions and destroyed around 150 various artillery pieces, 519 tanks, around 1000 various vehicles, 70 landing crafts, 2 Lavochkin La-3 fighters, Il-2 Stormovik and sunk Battleship "Marat", 2 Cruisers and a Destroyer. Rudel was responsible for such huge damages to the Red Army that Joseph Stalin himself put a price of 100.000 rubles on his head. He flew more than 600.000km and used more than 5.000.000 liters of fuel. Hans Rudel dropped over 1.000.000kg of bombs, fired over 1.000.000 of machine gun rounds, over 150.000 20mm rounds and over 5000 37mm rounds. Rudel thought that the Lend-Lease American tanks were easier to kill than the Soviet T-34s, but he hated their machine guns, because once he was shot down by one. Rudel was an outstanding pilot with experience, who loved to fly and destroy. He hated to take home leave or sick leave and even when he got his leg amputated he was not depressed since he could still do what he loved - fly and destroy. During his career, Hans Rudel showed remarkable power, toughness, fearlessness, unparalleled determination and arrogance but none of his photos show any impact of the hardship of war on his face. His personal bravery was beyond belief and his place in the annals of military history thoroughly deserved, although it is important to remember the words of an American Protocol-Officer, who absolutely correctly named Rudel "the typical Nazi Officer". Rudel's famous quotation was "Verloren ist nur, wer sich selbst aufgibt" ("Lost are only those, who abandon themselves").

Some of the information was provided by Jörg Muth.

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