

The German Jet Me-262 in 1944: A Failed Opportunity - Part I

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As early as 1937, the German Messerschmitt Company developed the jet plane, the Me-262 *Schwalbe* (Swallow). It was flown experimentally in 1941 with a piston engine and then successfully in 1942 with jet engines, but was rejected by the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) authorities -- perhaps out of the belief that the plane was too complex for practical use and that it would require extensive retraining of pilots. Additionally, the jet engines of the first experimental Me-262 had a lifetime of only about 4 or 5 hours. It must be also remembered that in 1942, and even later, the Luftwaffe emphasis in aircraft production was on bombers, with less attention given to fighter development.¹

A prototype of the Me-262 was flown by Adolf Galland, General of Fighter Pilots, in May 1943 and he expressed himself as highly satisfied with its performance. Erhard Milch, who was then Air Inspector General, agreed to putting the aircraft into large-scale production as a fighter plane. This required additional materials and manpower. Neither the materials nor the manpower, however, were received in sufficient quantities to be able to mass produce the Me-262 until 1944.²

With the beginning of intensive Allied bombing late in 1943 and early 1944, the necessity of developing a fast fighter plane became urgent. The Me-262 was exceedingly fast, with greatest efficiency achieved at maximum speed, and did not need high octane gasoline as fuel, a factor which was very welcome at a time of a growing gasoline shortage.³ For Galland and other Luftwaffe commanders, the Me-262 seemed just the right aircraft to take on Allied bomber formations without having to worry about their fighter escorts.

Production of the Me-262 began in March 1944, and during April either 13 or 16 were manufactured and delivered to the Luftwaffe.⁴ The Me-262 that the Luftwaffe accepted was a

¹ Overall Economic Effects Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy, October 31, 1945, p. 161, File: 3, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy (Final Report), European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 56, Reichsmarshal Herman Goering, June 29, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, "USSBS Interrogations," (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

² U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 6, Mr. Seiler, Chairman, Board of Directors, Messerschmitt Company, May 16, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, "USSBS Interrogations," (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 44, Dr. Karl Frydag, Chief of Air Frame Industry, published July 9, 1945, and attached Notes on Initial Interrogation of Karl Frydag, May 19, 1945 and Supplemental interview with Dr. Frydag on June 21, 1945, *ibid*.

³ Overall Economic Effects Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy, October 31, 1945, p. 161, File: 3, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy (Final Report), European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

⁴ Overall Economic Effects Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy, October 31, 1945, p. 161, File: 3, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War

single-seat, low-wing monoplane, with sharply swept back wings, a single tail, and powered by two Jumbo turbo-jet units. It had maximum speeds of 515 mph at 1,640 feet; 530 mph at 10,000 feet; 540 mph at 20,000 feet; and, 550 mph at 30,000 feet. It was about 100 mph faster than the American P-51. It had an endurance of 50-90 minutes depending on speed and altitude. It had four 30mm cannon fitted in the nose and had a maximum bomb load capacity of 2,200 pounds. The heavy armament was deadly to bomber formations and the speed made evasion of escorting fighters fairly easy.⁵

In April 1944 at an armament conference, Galland stated that with respect to fighters, the Americans had gained air superiority, and that development was almost to the point of air supremacy. He said something had to be done. Daylight fighting in the last four months, he said, the Germans had lost more than 1,000 flying personnel. Among them were many of the best flight captains, squadron leaders, and wing commanders. He said they were having problems, not with numbers, but with experienced pilots. The first thing to be changed, according to Galland, was that the aircraft industry must guarantee delivery of enough aircraft to build up the fighter arm. Second, they must have technically superior planes, such as the Me-262 or the Me-163 (a rocket-powered fighter aircraft); with them they could achieve a great deal. He stated "We need quality of performance, if only to restore in our own force the sense of superiority, even if our numbers are smaller." "At the moment," he added, "I would rather have one Me-262 than five Me-109's."⁶

However, Adolf Hitler, at this point, was still obsessed with the production of bombers over fighters. Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering knew this very well. At an April meeting Milch, Galland and Karl-Otto Saur, the head of the newly-formed *Jägerstab* (whose principal task was the expediting of fighter production and of restoring output of damaged factories), presented Goering a plan calling for an increase in the production of fighters of all types to a total of over 5,000 aircraft per month, a figure which was to be attained by a reduction in the output of bombers and other types. When Saur finished laying out the plan, Goering replied immediately with many and definite objections. The radical curtailment of the bomber program, especially

Economy (Final Report), European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Notes on the Jagerstab, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 345/1945, July 4, 1945, p. 6, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, *ibid.*; The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Over-all Report (European War), September 30, 1945, p. 25, File: 2, The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Over-all Report (European War), (Final Report), *ibid.*; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 6, Mr. Seiler, Chairman, Board of Directors, Messerschmitt Company, May 16, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, "USSBS Interrogations," (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

⁵ Office of the Assistant Chief of Art Staff, intelligence, "German Jet-Propelled Messerschmitt 262," *Headquarters AAF Intelligence Summary*, No. 45-8, pp. 34-35, File: 59A, Reference Material to Final Report, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Military Analysis Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, The Defeat of the German Air Force, n.d., p. 14, File: 59 The Defeat of the German Air Force (Final Report), *ibid.*; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 56, Reichsmarshal Herman Goering, June 29, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, "USSBS Interrogations," (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

⁶ Adolf Galland, *The First and The Last: The Rise and Fall of the German Fighter Forces, 1938-1945*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957), pp. 260-261.

that of the He-177 and the Ju-88 and their further development, was regarded by him as impossible and he rejected it abruptly. On the contrary he demanded an increase and a guarantee of a minimum production of 400 He-177 (with an eventual production of 500-600 per month) and 500 Junkers bombers (Ju 88's and Ju 188's) per month. Additionally Goering wanted the manufacture of the Ju 287 and the Ar 234. At this meeting Goering may or may not have told them that Hitler wanted the Me-262 used as a bomber. In any event, "The heavy bomber remains the kernel of the armament in the air," was his final decision. Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production Albert Speer's aircraft program was changed according to Goering's directives. Speer, however, cautioned Galland not to take the decisions as final, and promised to do everything in his power to increase the fighter production.⁷

Hitler, in late April or early May, during a discussion about the emergency aircraft program, asked how many Me-262s were able to carry bombs. Milch answered "None, my Fuhrer; the Me-262 is being built exclusively as a fighter aircraft." Hitler foamed with rage. According to Galland officers who were close to Hitler told him later that they had rarely witnessed such a fit of temper. Hitler raged against Milch, Goering, and the Luftwaffe at length, accusing them of unreliability, disobedience, and unfaithfulness.⁸ Hitler ordered Goering to have the Me-262 be made as a bomber.⁹

A few hours after the discussion, Milch, Karl-Heinrich Bodenschatz (liaison between Goering and Hitler), Wilhelm Messerschmitt (the commander of the testing stations), and Galland were called to Goering. He communicated to them Hitler's orders regarding the readjustment and rearming of the whole series of Me-262 as bombers. To avoid all misunderstanding, Goering said, no one in the future was allowed to refer to the Me-262 as a fighter or even as a fighter-bomber, but only as the "Blitz bomber."¹⁰ Messerschmitt and Galland tried desperately to argue against the decision, maintaining that the German fighter pilots had a right to demand this superior fighter aircraft for themselves. Galland had the impression that at the bottom of his heart Goering himself was convinced of the correctness of their argument. Goering concluded "So that

⁷ Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, p. 5, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Military Analysis Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Report on German Air Force Planning and Requirements in Relation to Production, August 13, 1945, p. 8, File: 59B, German Air Force-Order of Battle and Losses, *ibid.*; Galland, **The First and The Last**, pp. 193-194.

⁸ Galland, **The First and The Last**, p. 262. Soon afterward Milch was dismissed from his post. *ibid.*

⁹ U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 44, Dr. Karl Frydag, Chief of Air Frame Industry, published July 9, 1945, and attached Notes on Initial Interrogation of Karl Frydag, May 19, 1945 and Supplemental interview with Dr. Frydag on June 21, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, "USSBS Interrogations," (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 36, Interrogation of Officers of the Luftwaffe, published June 21, 1945, *ibid.*; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 56, Reichsmarshal Herman Goering, June 29, 1945, *ibid.*; Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, p. 2, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

¹⁰ Galland, **The First and The Last**, p. 262.

we may understand each other clearly, I must repeat that a debate or a discussion of the fundamental question cannot be thought of anymore.”¹¹

With Hitler’s mandate, during May, while Germany was being increasingly attacked from the air, the Luftwaffe tried to make a bomber out of the Me-262. Numerous changes had to be made on the aircraft, such as adding auxiliary tanks to increase its range for bombing missions. Pilots had to be trained, tactical methods had to be found, and, bombing had to be practiced. The Germans had to also deal with the fact that for regular dive-bombing the Me-262 was too fast to safely be held on target and be able to make dives upon targets effectively at low altitudes. To address this problem, Hitler expressly forbade shallow angle dives -- or indeed any speed exceeding 470 mph.¹²

Meanwhile, in mid-April, a training unit for the first Me-262s produced as fighters was established at Lechfeld just south of Augsburg. It was commanded by Captain Werner Thierfelder. There, fighter pilots were trained to be able to handle the Me-262 in combat assignments. At some point in the late spring the test unit flew one or more missions to help protect the chemical plant at Leuna.¹³

During May Hitler believed that Luftwaffe bombers, including the Me-262 fighter-bomber, could throw back the inevitable Allied invasion and directly support German ground forces should the Allies get a foothold on the Continent.¹⁴ At some point in the early summer Luftwaffe General Karl Koller explained to Hitler that the Me-262 was too fast to be used effectively for bombing. Koller pointed out that if it were used against Allied advancing columns in France, most of the bombs would fall at some distance from the roads and would be wasted. Hitler’s reply was “there are so many Allied vehicles on the roads that if you drop a bomb it is sure to hit something.”¹⁵

¹¹ Galland, **The First and The Last**, pp. 262-263. It was reported that in the spring of 1944 Goering was converted to Milch’s views regarding the increase in fighters. Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, p. 2, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

¹² Galland, **The First and The Last**, p. 263; Cajor Bekker, **The Luftwaffe War Diaries** (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p. 486.

¹³ Dr. Willi Messerschmitt, “The ME-262: Development, Experience, Success, and Prospects,” in David C. Isby, ed., **Fighting The Bombers: The Luftwaffe’s Struggle Against the Allied Bomber Offensive** (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, 2003), p. 188; Generalmajor Hans-Detlef Herhuth von Rohden, compiler, August 1946, “Reich Air Defense in World War II: A Strategic-Tactical Survey,” *ibid.*, p.37; Bekker, **The Luftwaffe War Diaries**, p. 530.

¹⁴ U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 6, Mr. Seiler, Chairman, Board of Directors, Messerschmitt Company, May 16, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, “USSBS Interrogations,” (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

¹⁵ U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 8, Lt. Gen. Karl Koller, Chief of Staff of the Luftwaffe, May 23-24, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, “USSBS Interrogations,” (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

The Allied invasion came on June 6, and the Me-262 as a “Blitz Bomber” was still not ready for action.¹⁶ And the few Luftwaffe aircraft available to meet the Allied onslaught were quickly destroyed, so by June 21 the Luftwaffe had been swept off the sky in the West.¹⁷

While the Allied forces moved inland during June and July, Allied air power pounded targets in France, the Low Countries, and in Germany. Hitler still insisted that the Me-262 be constructed and used as a bomber, thus depriving the Luftwaffe of a significant resource to fight the Allied bombers. During June, 28 Me-262s were produced as bombers and during July 59 Me-262s were produced as bombers; none during those two months produced as fighters.¹⁸ Also hampering the Luftwaffe Fighter Command was the continued insistence by Hitler and Goering during the early summer to maintain bomber output.¹⁹

Late in July Johannes Steinhoff came from Italy, where he served as commander of the 77 fighter wing, to Wolfsschanze to receive the Swords pendant to the Knight’s Cross Oak Leaf Cluster. There were two other officers also present to receive their decorations. Hitler said he wanted to know from them how things really were. He asked if the Messerschmitts and Folke-Wulfs were inferior to the American planes. One of the Lieutenants answered affirmatively, stating they were between fifty and seventy kilometers an hour faster. They could fly higher and they were more maneuverable. Hitler said he thought the German planes had methanol-injection engines making them extremely powerful. The Lieutenant said even so, the Americans were faster. Steinhoff jumped in stating they need a new and better aircraft, adding he was thinking of the jet fighter. “He turned to face me, fixing those dead eyes on me. I had evidently broken a taboo because a flush came to his cheeks. The fingers of his left hand began to drum nervously on the table ‘When will people stop trying to go behind my back and use my tried and tested front-line commanders to put pressure on me....’” Steinhoff quickly said that he had flown the Me-262 a few days previously and thought it was a magnificent aircraft. Steinhoff wrote:

His voice suddenly had a metallic, threatening edge to it: ‘I don’t wish to hear any more of this nonsense! I’ve had enough of it! Fate hands me this one chance of wreaking a terrible vengeance-and here are you people trying to deprive me of it with short-sighted squabbles between bomber and fighter pilots. My decision is made. This aircraft is a

¹⁶ Galland, **The First and The Last**, p. 263.

¹⁷ Interrogation Center, Headquarters, 12th Army Group, Consolidated Interrogation Report (CIR) No. 1, Subject: Effects of US Strategic and Tactical Air Power, June 12, 1945, p. 3, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

¹⁸ German Aircraft Production June 1944-February 1945, Appendix I to Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Overall Economic Effects Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy, October 31, 1945, p. 161, File: 3, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy (Final Report), *ibid*.

¹⁹ Military Analysis Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Report on German Air Force Planning and Requirements in Relation to Production, August 13, 1945, p. 8, File: 59B, German Air Force-Order of Battle and Losses, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

bomber, a *Blitz* bomber-my instrument of revenge! It is not a fighter and it never can be a fighter.’

Steinhoff wanted to put in another protest but Hitler cut him short. After talking about how the Me-262 was really not suitable as a fighter, Hitler launched into another lecture about how the German people showed greatness in adversity; he expected a historical turning-point laying just ahead, and expressed his confidence in victory in the end as long as the brave fighting men did their duty. He ended with “‘The German people is capable when its back is to the wall, of incredible, magnificent achievements. I shall astonish the world by mobilizing the entire nation in a way the world has never seen before. I shall repay terror with terror.’”²⁰

Hitler, in the meantime, in early July at the insistence of the Luftwaffe and the aircraft industry, agreed to cut down bomber output in favor of the manufacture of fighters. The *Jägerstab* issued an industrial program on July 15, which reduced bomber production to less than 200 per month (excluding Me- 262s still carried as bombers), deleted the He-177 bomber from production, and effected a decrease in the number of aircraft types. This reduction of types permitted the industry to concentrate on mass production of fighter aircraft.²¹

At some point, probably in July, Captain Thierfelder’s Me-262 fighter training unit received formal permission to commence operations. It did so, attacking Allied planes intent on bombing the airfields at Lechfeld and Leipheim. Claims were made that the Me-262s successfully dispersed bomber formations and Royal Air Force Mosquitoes. During one of the first operational sorties Thierfelder was killed when his aircraft crashed in flames.²²

During August, 15 Me-262s were produced as bombers, while only five were produced as fighter planes.²³ And it was not until August that the first Me-262 fighter-bombers (the so-called “blitz-

²⁰ Johannes Steinhoff, **The Final Hours: A German Jet Pilot Plots Against Goering** (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1977), p. 39.

²¹ Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, p. 5, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Military Analysis Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Report on German Air Force Planning and Requirements in Relation to Production, August 13, 1945, p. 8, File: 59B, German Air Force-Order of Battle and Losses, *ibid.* German aircraft industry reached its peak production between July and September 1944 with a total output of over 4,000 aircraft of all types in each of the three months concerned and thereafter production declined. Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, p. 5, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

²² Bekker, **The Luftwaffe War Diaries**, p. 530; Dr. Willi Messerschmitt, “The ME-262: Development, Experience, Success, and Prospects,” in Isby, ed., **Fighting The Bombers**, pp. 189 and 190.

²³ German Aircraft Production June 1944-February 1945, Appendix I to Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

bomber”) were ready for action.²⁴ During the summer crews of I/KG 51 (Luftwaffe bomber wing) were chosen to fly the Me-262 fighter-bomber operationally. In horizontal trials they failed to hit a thing; their bombs often landing a mile from the target. Only after the airframe has been strengthened, and they could attack on a shallow dive, did results improve.²⁵

In August an operational team of Me-262 fighter-bombers was posted to Juvincourt, near Rheims, and assigned to participate in the battle. At the outset they had just nine aircraft. Of these, two broke up leaving Germany owing to faulty servicing. A third aircraft was lost in the course of the intermediate landing at Schwabisch-Hall. The pilot of the fourth failed to find Juvincourt, had to force land, and was likewise lost to the strength. Now five planes were left. By the end of October they had been reinforced by another twenty-five, though II/KG 51 joined them with the fighter-bomber version of the Me-262. When the aircraft did go into action, the chances of a success at that point were minimal because the Allied advance was quite spread out. During these actions a few bombs were dropped daily somewhere on enemy territory. Very rarely was one able to say what, if anything, they had hit, or with what result.²⁶

²⁴ Galland, **The First and The Last**, p. 263.

²⁵ Bekker, **The Luftwaffe War Diaries**, pp. 486-487.

²⁶ Bekker, **The Luftwaffe War Diaries**, p. 487; Galland, **The First and The Last**, p. 263.