

Meanwhile, the partisans had promptly looted the aircraft and then set it on fire. The death of Alois Lechner was a heavy blow, and it was left to the *Staffelkapitän* of 3./NJG 100, *Hptm.* Kurt Bonow, to take command of the *Gruppe*.

A Busy Spring

Meanwhile, the war moved ever onwards, and on 4 March 1944, the three Soviet Ukranian Fronts launched an offensive in the south, successfully pushing into western Ukraine and sweeping southwards on to the Dniester River, which was crossed on 20 March. This created a long southern flank for *Heeresgruppe Mitte* in the Pripyat Marshes. To the north of Orscha and Bobruisk, where most of I./NJG 100 was based, the 1. and 2. Baltic Fronts had established staging points for further offensive action after a successful operation in mid-January to mid-February, and were ready to push into the Baltic countries and threaten German territory in East Prussia. Immediately to the south were the Western and Belorussian Fronts, with their supporting air forces, 1.VA and 16.VA, sending an average of 55 to 110 bomber, harassment and partisan supply sorties into *Luftflotte 6* territory every night.

As a result of the plentiful targets on offer, the operational area of radar train Sumatra I in the Polotsk region was sardonically christened

the 'EK-Schule' by the night fighter airmen, many of whom undertook their first missions in this sector, and numerous aerial victories were scored there. *Lt.* Gustav-Eduard Francsi was one of the successful pilots, celebrating his first victory on 4 March, which was also the first success of radar train Sumatra I in 1944. At 18:14, *Lt.* Francsi hit an Il-4 – presumably from 8.GAP DD and piloted by *Gv.Ml.Lt.* Mixail Andreevich Logvinov – four kilometres north-west of Polotsk. The burning aircraft plummeted to earth, with the impact directly observed and confirmed by the Sumatra I radar team. In all, *Lt.* Francsi, in conjunction with his crewmates, *Uffz.* Schröter and *Uffz.* Edmund Regneri, would score a total of fourteen victories up to the end of April 1944 with the assistance of Sumatra I.

A few nights later, on 9/10 March, it was the turn of *Ofw.* Karl Strohecker to achieve success. Vectored towards two tugs of 1.OAPP VDV towing gliders loaded with supplies for the partisans, Strohecker closed in. He succeeded in shooting down both of the SB-2 glider tugs near Polotsk, the Soviet crews taking to their parachutes. These two victories were Strohecker's fourth and fifth kills, now making him an ace. Five days later, the *Gruppe* was belatedly instructed to change its unit code marking from 'C9 + __' for NJG 5 to 'W7 + __' for NJG 100.

Hptm. Godbersen made his return to the Eastern Front in this period, taking over his old 1. *Schwarm* of 1./NJG 100 from *Oblt.* Adolf Kaiser on 10 March. Kaiser would continue with the unit for a little while, before transferring to 1./NJG 2 in the West on the 23rd, ending the war with twenty victories and having the good fortune to survive. This was followed on 18/19 March by his near-namesake, *Lt.* Erich Kayser, achieving his first aerial victory. It was a Li-2 near Polotsk, an event celebrated extensively in the unit mess at Parafjanovo, although this did not stop the war from dragging on. The next evening, Soviet aircraft were once more flying supplies to partisan groups behind the 16. *Armee* and 3. *Panzerarmee* fronts. At 18:00 *Fw.* de Fries of 1./NJG 100 was ordered to take off and then await instructions from radar train Sumatra I. Heinz de Fries later wrote of subsequent events:

"We had not been in the air for ten minutes when the command post [in the radar train] reported

Below: *Fw.* Heinz de Fries enjoys the sun beneath his Ju 88 at Parafjanovo airfield on 20 March 1944. (Meyer)



Source notes not included yet, but will be in the printed book.



Nachtabschuß

Um 18.14 Uhr wurde eine Li-2
4 km nordwestlich Polotsk ab-
geschossen. Brennender Abbruch
und anschließend Aufschlag-
brand beobachtet.

Besatzung: Francsi, Schrötter,
Regneri
Gerätestellung: Sumatra I
Fl: Lt. Flögel
Erzeugen:

that enemy aircraft were on their way. We flew towards the enemy at full throttle and suddenly – at a distance of about 30 metres – we darted past a large black shadow. We lost sight of this Soviet, but after a few moments Artur saw a ‘star’ which did a right turn, and in the next moment we saw an Iwan without flame dampers. Then the big shadow of a PS-84 took shape; I fired a burst, but it had no effect. Now he knew what was going on and was turning and twisting for his life. All of a sudden, we saw an illuminated partisan airfield. In the second attack I fired a burst into the belly, and above us hung a big burning torch. With a long tail of smoke behind it, the Soviet aircraft crashed at 18:58.”

The Li-2 from the GVF crashed twenty kilometres south-west of Polotsk, and as was the case for Lt. Kayser on the previous night, this kill was the first claimed by Fw. de Fries. Elsewhere, a second Li-2 of 3.TAP, 1.TAD GVF, was hit by 3./NJG 100 pilot Lt. Ulrich Trüber at an altitude of 900 metres at about 21:00, and it exploded in mid-air. The aircraft crashed near the village of Yanawshchyna, about

80 kilometres west of Orscha. The sole survivor of the crash was a radio operator who was being transported to the partisans.

Throughout this period, the Soviet efforts to resupply partisan units behind the Heeresgruppe Mitte front were relentless, in an attempt to bolster their manpower, weapons and equipment, increasing the likelihood that they could disrupt German preparations for spring or summer operations. During the night of 22/23 March, a total of seventeen U-2s of 389.NBAP, 314.NBAD, were employed on supply operations by 3.VA. At 20:54 in collaboration with Sumatra I, Fw. Helmut Konter managed to down one of these biplanes twelve kilometres west of Polotsk. Three nights later, on 25/26 March, Konter was back in the thick of it, this time engaging some of the eighteen U-2s of 389. NBAP flying into the Polotsk area. Konter claimed to have shot down four U-2s prior to midnight, yet on the basis of available Soviet documents, it is impossible to establish that any of these aircraft were actually destroyed. Rather, 389.NBAP crews reported that they had been engaged by German

Above: The drawing of Francsi's first victory from his diary. He drew and described all his victories during 1944.

night fighters and escaped, although some aircraft had suffered damage.

30 March 1944 marked the end of a very difficult winter campaign by the Red Army's Western and Belorussian Fronts, which saw them undertake seven major offensives, gaining only minimal ground in return for heavy casualties.

Towards the end of March and in the beginning of April, the residential and workshop trains of the *Schwärme* were required to be released so that they could be converted into the new radar equipment trains, to be designated Raubvogel 1 through 9 (as discussed in Chapter 3).

On 30 March, one of the handful of Fw 189s was assigned to Lt. Francsi of 1./NJG 100, who, by this time, had also been appointed *Gruppe Technischer Offizier*. On the following night, 31 March/1 April, U-2s of 314.NBAD again flew to Lake Viacellie, just south of Ushachi, bringing supplies to the partisans.

Below: Map showing the difficult situation for the Germans in central sector of the Eastern Front 1 April 1944.



At 00:07, Lt. Francsi in his Fw 189 managed to hit one of these U-2s south-east of Polotsk over a frozen lake that was being used as a partisan airfield. The combat took place at an altitude of just 300 metres, and the Soviet machine managed to escape, albeit with damage. For his part, Francsi claimed this as a kill, and despite the lack of confirmatory evidence or witnesses, he was in fact awarded this victory – his second.

Francsi was active again the following night, and on this occasion was able to confirm the destruction of several aircraft. On the night of 1/2 April, fifteen U-2s of 389.NBAP were once more employed south of Polotsk to deliver supplies to the partisans, this time at Lake Cherstvyakoye. Lt. Kayser and Lt. Francsi intercepted, and the pair claimed the destruction of three of the biplanes within an hour. Lt. Kayser's victim was a U-2 of 105. GOAP GVF piloted by *Ml.Lt.* Afanasiy Vasilevich Zoga. His U-2 suffered a punctured fuel tank, and the pilot was wounded in the arm and thigh, but managed to put his aircraft down at a partisan landing site south of Polotsk shortly after 21:00. The next two claims were made by Lt. Francsi south-east of Polotsk. He wrote of the first:

"Delayed take-off from Orscha, because Bel Ami was not ready. I shot down a U-2 at 22:05 in Pl.Qu. 25 Ost/96573 [33 kilometres south-east of Polotsk]. Whilst in transit [to the assigned patrol point] I engaged a Krebsler on its return flight. Attack from behind – long burst of fire – victory, going down in flames.

Immediately after shooting down the first Krebsler, a new contact on the same course. At 22:18 a victory over a U-2 in Pl.Qu. 25 Ost/86692 [twenty kilometres south-south-east of Polotsk]. Approach and firing from behind. Parts of the aircraft broke away. Burning on impact. 'Bel Ami' proved its worth. We landed at Polotsk with the Fw 189."

Although the Germans claimed destruction of three U-2s, two of their Soviet foes managed to land in partisan territory with minor damage, and the fate of the third aircraft is unknown, with no corresponding loss recorded in the war diaries of 1.VA or 3.VA. This is another example of how easy it was to overclaim during evening and night missions – intentionally or unintentionally. Most night victories were able to be confirmed, except



for aircraft going down in partisan territory, and a rigid *Luftwaffe* claims system generally made sure that claims were verified.

I./NJG 100's campaign against the Soviet harassment aircraft continued, and Lt. Francsi shot down his fifth aircraft during the night of 3/4 April, this time a U-2 of 634.NBAP, 325.NBAD, at 01:54. The Soviet aircraft went down in approximately the same location as so many in recent times, around 35 kilometres south-east of Polotsk. The German victor wrote:

"Only the second mission of the night, but after many approaches we made contact, which finally resulted in a victory. We attacked from behind, and the cannon failed after a few rounds. Instead, we fired with two MG 17. This produced fires.

That same night the names of Schröter and Regneri were submitted for award of the Eiserne Kreuz 1. Klasse."

The successes recently achieved by the *Gruppe* were being offset by a growing casualty list. On the night of 5/6 April, the crew of pilot *Fw.* Joachim Baltrusch, radio operator *Uffz.* Heinrich Kirschner, and flight mechanic *Uffz.* Walter Müller from the 3. *Schwarm* of 3./NJG 100 were lost when they crashed during a combat mission. Their Ju 88 C-6 'W7 + ZL' was possibly hit by the rear gunner of a U-2 during combat. Baltrusch and his crew had arrived on the Eastern Front at the end of November 1943, along with *Fw.* de Fries, and had not seen a great deal of action due to the winter lull.

Above: Francsi's drawing of his second victory taking place over a village with partisans lighting up a landing strip on a frozen lake.

Partly compensating for the loss of Baltrusch and his crew, during the same night, Lt. Francsi and his gunner, Fw. Regneri, were airborne in their Fw 189 and shot down a pair of U-2s north-west of Tolotschin in an unusual way, as their report revealed:

“Two U-2s at 21:09 and 21:10 in Pl.Qu. 25 Ost/95188 [45 km east-south-east of Lepel]. Take-off from Orscha, with Oblt. Loheit of Borneo II guiding us to two incoming Krebsers. It was a bright night – two supply aircraft flying to the partisans as a pair were located and the one in front was attacked. Aerial combat in a steep dive. Victory at an altitude of 500 metres. At the same time Regneri shot down the second U-2, which tried to attack us from behind. Burning victories and impact fires.”

The Polotsk Partisans

The Polotsk Lowlands were the second most important area of Soviet partisan activity, surpassed only by the groups in the Bryansk forests. It was an extensive area of some 37,550 square kilometres, thickly forested and with swampy terrain, lying between the Viliya and Drina rivers, from Molodechno and Orscha in the south to Rossono and Nevel in the north, and including the city of Vitebsk on its eastern border. It was ideal partisan country, and by January 1944 there were perhaps 50,000 partisans concealed in the area, most of whom were in four large concentrations

During 1943, it was the substantial size of the partisan groups in the Polotsk Lowlands that was responsible for the large number of Soviet night supply flights into the area. However, in 1944 the Stavka developed high expectations for these partisans when the next Red Army offensive commenced. They were to be tasked with blocking German lines of retreat, becoming the anvil against which German frontline units were to be smashed by the hammer blows of the regular Soviet armies attacking from the east. Consequently, beginning in March 1944, the increased importance the Soviets assigned to the partisans of the Polotsk Lowlands resulted in a major expansion of supply flights into the area, and led directly to the increased number of I./NJG 100 interceptions in the region, especially around Polotsk itself. 3. *Panzerarmee* also commenced large-scale land offensives against the partisans on 11 April, which would achieve considerable success over the following two months, and resulted in more Soviet night air activities.

In the event, most of this Soviet investment would prove unproductive. At the start of the Red Army's summer offensive, partisan demolitions did disrupt the north-south Vitebsk-Orscha railway line, as well as the diagonal line between Polotsk and Molodechno, but the areas these crossed were overrun by Red Army spearheads so quickly that the demolitions were probably of greater inconvenience to the Soviets. The plan to have partisan units stopping the gaps through which ran the German lines of retreat proved unrealistic for a multitude of reasons, including the disruption caused by the more effective of the 3. *Panzerarmee* anti-partisan drives.

It can be concluded that the circumstances which made the Polotsk Lowlands favourable for amassing partisans were also the reason those partisans were of marginal usefulness even when the front had drawn near. However, the very tangible result for I./NJG 100 during 1944 was that the Polotsk Lowlands provided the unit with an area of rich pickings, and an ideal environment for the initial trials of the Fw 189 as a counter to the low, slow biplane targets.

Some 45 minutes after the first engagement, Lt. Francsi claimed his eighth kill, this time shooting down an aircraft north-west of Orscha:

“Oblt. Loheit directed me to an R-5, which was flying a harassment mission. After a good approach, I attacked from behind and the R-5 trundled off on fire. The crash was joyfully confirmed: ‘Congratulations!’ from Borneo II.”

Meanwhile, together with Lt. Francsi, and former Zerstörer and I./NJG 3 pilot Oblt. Hans Schmid, Fw. de Fries was also able to shoot down a U-2 – his second victory – near Polotsk:

“In the evening of 5 April Oblt. Schmid took off ahead of us and managed to shoot down a U-2. We were sent into the air after him, and from the radar train we received a vector to a target, which we quickly found. It was a U-2, a Krebser, as we called them. He flew at an altitude of just 50 metres. We were at 1,000 metres and he stood out very clearly in the moonlight against the snow. However, he had also spotted us and was twisting round to shake our aim off until he could reach an area of dark forest. We lost sight of him above that dark background. After a while, we clashed with another U-2. Following a dogfight he ended up flying 150-200 metres above us and I pulled our bird vertically into the air, firing a burst without any apparent effect. Back at base we were congratulated, but without any certainty. The next day, Oblt. Schmid and I went to search for the two victims near Polotsk. I found footprints and small aircraft parts near a small stream; the partisans had removed the larger parts during the night, while Oblt. Schmid also found his heap of wreckage.”

This was Schmid's first Eastern Front victory, and his nineteenth overall. Also victorious that night was Fw. Rudi Düding, who shot down an R-5 of 120.AP GVF, ten kilometres north of Parichi, to the south of Bobruisk.

The aid rendered by the radar trains was invaluable to the *Gruppe's* effectiveness, and once again proved its worth on the following night, 6/7 April, when Hptm. Karl-Hans Godbersen received the first bearing from Sumatra I at 20:36, taking him to a westward-flying aircraft. Initial visual contact



was established at 20:49 and just a minute later, *Hptm.* Godbersen unloaded his machine-guns into the luckless Soviet aircraft, which crashed twenty kilometres west-north-west of Polotsk. Godbersen's victim was an R-5 of 105.GOAP GVF. Sumatra I was in action again on 7/8 April, transmitting its first vector at 21:04, when it led *Uffz.* Hans Hick to an R-5. The Soviet crew quickly sighted the night fighter and attempted to shake it off, but *Uffz.* Hick held back and tracked the R-5 whilst circling to offset the difference in flying speeds. At 21:23 he hit the aircraft, which crashed twenty kilometres south-east of Polotsk. This was a signal event, being Hick's first victory of the war, and the 90th victory for Sumatra I. The following night it would be the turn of *Lt.* Ulrich Trüber to pair with Sumatra I and achieve a kill, this time a U-2 of 16.NBAP, 325.NBAD, which crashed near the village of Divnovo.

Tragedy again struck the *Gruppe* when two 3./NJG 100 aircraft and their crews were lost far behind the frontline on 11 April 1944. Pilot *Fw.* Ernst Potthast, radio operator *Uffz.* Werner Hauck, and flight mechanic *Obgefr.* Rudolf Kochta of the 1. *Schwarm* crashed at Radensdorf near Drebkau after being intercepted by American fighters of the Eighth Air Force whilst on a transfer flight. The second Ju 88 of 3./NJG 100 was also lost to American fighters, crashing near Weißwasser/Oberlausitz as a result of combat, killing the flight mechanic, *Obgefr.* Gerhard Niesen of 3./NJG 100, along with the other two crew members from 11./NJG 5.

On the same day as those losses, 3. *Panzerarmee* began a large-scale anti-partisan operation against the Ushachi complex, between Lepel and Polotsk, using 20.000 troops. Over the next few weeks the Germans gradually closed in and destroyed the Soviet-supported force. The Soviet air force would do its bit to support the beleaguered partisans, undertaking numerous supply flights to the Polotsk area, providing I./NJG 100 with plenty of targets. The next I./NJG 100 success was achieved by *Lt.* Francis north-west of Polotsk on 14 April, and again he was in a Fw 189:

"An R-5 in Pl.Qu. 25 Ost/86693 [fifteen kilometres north-west of Polotsk] at 21:27. New Bel

Above: Ju 88 C-6 'W7 + HH' possibly of 1./NJG 100. Note the winter camouflage applied over the standard pattern, also partially covering the swastika.

Below: Ju 88 C-6 'W7 + HH' possibly of 1./NJG 100 over the central sector of the Eastern Front, early spring 1944.

