

The First Zemke Fan on May 12, 1944

Or the legend of the dogfight between
Maj. Günther Rall and Col. Hubert Zemke

By Dr. Gerhard Kaschuba

[Editor's Note: This article was originally written and submitted to the AAHS in German. Through the efforts of Jerri Bergen, John Hazlet, Tom Butz, this editor and others the article has been translated into English and edited for style and clarity. While we have attempted to accurately preserve the original content, it is possible unintentional errors may have been introduced some due to the translation efforts. If this is so, we apologize to the author and are happy to publish any clarification needed to set the record straight.]

Background

In January 1944, Gen. James Doolittle took command of the 8th U.S. Army Air Force. The commander-in-chief of the USAAF, Gen. Henry H. Arnold, had previously given the order in his new Year's message: "This is a must – destroy the enemy air force wherever you find them, in the air, on the ground, and in the factories." Until then, the fighter groups of the 8th USAAF had been required to provide defensive escort for the bombers. Doolittle, on the other hand, saw in the fighters a flexible offensive weapon designed to fight the enemy far away from the bombers. Maj. Gen. William E. Kepner, commander of the 8th U.S. Fighter Command, informed the commanders of his fighter groups about the change of tactics. One of these men was Col. Hubert Zemke.

Col. Hubert Zemke and the 56th Fighter Group

In September 1942, the then Major Zemke assumed command of the 56th Fighter Group. The unit had been transferred to England in January 1943. On April 8, 1943, Zemke was promoted to colonel. He put great emphasis on flight discipline, teamwork and the development of new tactics. Under his leadership, the 56th Fighter Group by the summer of 1943 had risen to become the most successful American fighter group in Europe. General Doolittle once described Zemke as the "greatest fighter group commander." During WWII, Colonel Zemke scored a total of 17.75 confirmed air victories and 8.5 aircraft destroyed on the ground. American media gave the 56th Fighter Group the name "Zemke's Wolfpack." As early

as the summer of 1943, Zemke had begun to doubt the validity of the defensive escort tactics. Without the knowledge of his superiors, he experimented with new forms of escort protection. During the missions, he positioned a fighter squadron, for example, about five to 10 miles ahead of the leading bomb group. In this way, German fighters should be detected early and frontal attacks on the bombers significantly reduced.

In April 1944, the 56th Fighter Group was relocated from Halesworth to Boxted. Both airfields were located in southeast England. The group was divided into the 61st, 62nd and 63rd Fighter Squadrons and equipped with the Republic P-47



Col. Hubert Zemke standing in the cockpit of his P-47. (USAAF photo)

Hubert Zemke Jr, son of Col. Hubert Zemke, passed away on February 17, 2018, as we were going to press. Zemke (Jr) was instrumental in bringing Dr. Kaschuba's historical research and subsequent German publication to the attention of AAHS. He also provided many hours of detailed discussions and insights into the origination of the traditional version of events of this historic battle on May 12, 1944. We honor both the legacy of Col. Zemke and his son's pursuit of historical accuracy."



63rd Fighter Squadron, 56th Fighter Group preparing to depart on a mission from Boxted, England. (From the Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS photo archives)

Thunderbolt. Each squadron consisted of four flights with four planes in each flight. Beginning in April 1944, the group operated at times with two sub-groups 'A' and 'B', using call sign *Fairbank* and *Subway* in radio traffic.

New German Tactics

The Luftwaffe found it necessary to evolve their tactics in the spring 1944, due to the deeper penetration into Germany by Allied bombers and their escort fighters. Within the fighter squadrons of the Reich defense, a light and usually two heavy groups were formed, which were used as a closed combat unit. However, these battle groups could also go beyond the squadron strength. The "light," or high altitude group, had the task of protecting the "heavy" hunters from the American escort fighters. The planes of the altitude group providing "top cover" were equipped with the Me 109 G-5 or G-6. In the heavy groups, Me 109 G-6 or Fw 190 A-6 to A-8 were used due to their stronger armament. These fighter groups were tasked with attacking and destroying the American bombers. After takeoff the battle groups (the individual units were distributed to different airfields) would rendezvous over a conspicuous geographical orientation point. From there, the German fighter officers directed the battle group on the route of the incoming American bombers. They would try to attack the most vulnerable parts of the bomber stream.

History of the Zemke Fan

The Zemke fan was a new tactic devised by Col. Zemke. One or two fighter groups should fly ahead of the bomber stream, split up over a conspicuous geographical point and patrol a larger airspace. This should improve the chance to sift through and combat the German formations preparing to attack the U.S. bombers. Starting in February 1944, Zemke had repeatedly made such proposals, but they had all been rejected. The permission to test this tactic was given by Maj. Gen. William E. Kepner, surprisingly, on May 11, 1944. He named the new tactic, according to its inventor, the "Zemke Fan."

May 12, 1944 Raid

The raid on May 12, 1944, introduced two innovations in aerial warfare. On this day, on the initiative of Gen. Carl A. Spaatz, systematic attacks on targets of the German fuel industry were carried out for the first time. The second novelty was the trial of the Zemke Fan. The attacks on fuel supply had been expected by the Germans for a long time. As early as April 22,

1943, Gen. Field Marshal Erhard Milch, commanding general of the Luftwaffe, commented: "The hydrogenation works [hydrocarbon refineries] are the worst thing that they can strike. That means the possibility of the whole war being lost. It is not only the planes, but also the tanks and submarines still, if the hydrogenation works should really be hit." To this day, there is controversy about why the Allies attacked the hydrogenation works so late. These plants were much more important than the oil fields of Ploiesti in Romania. Their share of supply was clearly above the Romanian deliveries. For example, the hydrogenation works supplied almost all Luftwaffe's demand for aviation fuel. The oil offensive was to become the only truly successful deployment of Allied strategic air forces.

In England, 886 B-17s and B-24s were launched by the 8th USAAF. 980 American fighters including P-38 Lightnings, P-47 Thunderbolts and P-51 Mustangs of the 8th and 9th USAAF formed the accompanying protection. The primary targets were five fuel refineries in the area around Leipzig and Brück. In order to mislead the air defenses, two warehouses in Zwickau were attacked as diversionary targets.

To counter the large-scale attack, the Luftwaffe was able to put up a total of 419 fighters. The result was one of the fiercest aerial battles over the Reich territory to that date. The attack was a complete success for the American side. The fuel refineries in Leuna, Böhlen, Zeitz, Lützenkendorf were heavily hit and most had to be temporarily shut down. Armament Minister Albert Speer said on May 19, 1944, in a meeting at Berchtesgaden to Adolf Hitler: "The adversary has hit us in one of our weakest



Flight of 63rd Fighter Squadron, 56th Fighter Group on patrol in this undated photograph. UN-Z (2nd from bottom in left row) could be Zemke, depending on the date of the photo. (From the Gerald Balzer collection, AAHS photo archives)



Maj. Günther Rall. Note in the photo at right that he preferred to wear a flight jacket very similar to American issued jackets. This caused some confusion with the locals after he bailed out of his damaged fighter.

places, [if] he stays there, then there will be no significant fuel production. We only hope that the other side also has a general staff of the air force who thinks as haphazardly as ours. “

The Americans lost 46 heavy bombers (43 B-17 Flying Fortress, three B-24 Liberator) and nine fighters (four P-47 Thunderbolts, five P-51 Mustangs). In defense of this attack, the Luftwaffe lost 76 single- and twin-engine fighters (51 Me 109, 20 Fw 190, five Me 410).

To complete the Zemke Fan, the 56th Fighter Group was split into two subgroups, ‘A’ and ‘B’. Group ‘A’ (Fairbank) consisted of 24 fighters led by Colonel Zemke. Group ‘B’ (Subway) also consisted of 24 planes and was led by Lt. Col. Francis S. Gabreski. Group ‘B’ was positioned five minutes flying time behind Group ‘A’ and was designated as the tactical reserve.

The 56th Fighter Group launched at 9.36 a.m. from Boxted. Colonel Zemke and his wingman, 2nd Lt. Willard D. Johnson, were the first in the air. Two more planes followed in half-minute intervals until the whole squadron was airborne. The complete Group ‘A’ was airborne at 9:51 o’clock. After a circle, the group began climbing to the east in flight direction. Around 10:28 a.m., 2nd Lt. John McDonnell, the fourth man in Zemke’s flight aborted for mechanical reasons. He had problems with the fuel supply. The fighting strength of the group ‘A’ would be reduced by two more aircraft in the course of the operation. At Knokke, Belgium, Group ‘A’ crossed the coast line at 10:28 a.m.

Group ‘B’ began launching at 9:51 a.m. with 24 Thunderbolts. After six minutes, this group was in the air too. At 10.33 a.m., group ‘B’ crossed the coast line at Ostend, Belgium, about 15 miles southwest of Knokke. They reached Koblenz at 11:27

a.m. at an altitude of 20,000 feet. There may have been some mission aborts in group ‘B’ that are unknown to this author. Group ‘A’ had already fanned out at 11:25 a.m. over a conspicuous bend in the Rhine River, which is located about 30 miles south of Koblenz. It is believe that this must be the famous “Knee of the Rhine” at Bingen. Group ‘B’, being designated as a tactical reserve to the Group ‘A,’ took up a holding position to the southeast of Koblenz where they could quickly support Group ‘A’ if necessary. It was planned that 1st Lt. Bernard R. Smith’s *York White* flight and *York Red* Flight would cover the northern sector and *Icejug White* flight and *Icejug Red* flight, led by Capt. Joe Powers, formed the southern shield, while Lt. Col. Francis S. Gabreski with the eight P-47 Thunderbolt of *Household White* flight and *Household Red* flight were positioned in the center of this area.

The Zemke Fan in Literature

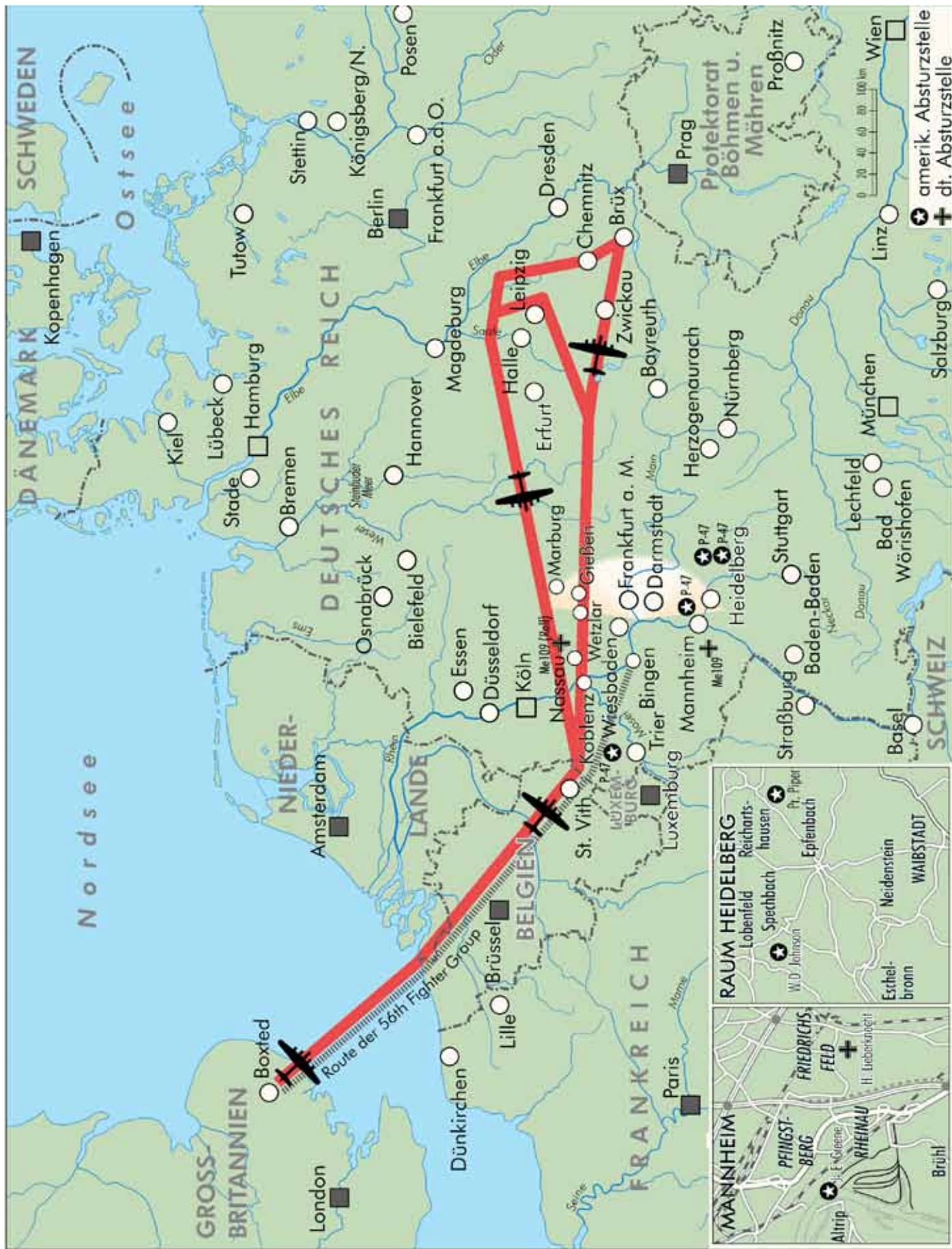
Following WWII Col. Zemke spoke and wrote about the May 12, 1944, raid a number of times. The first detailed

presentation of the events is contained in the book *Zemke’s Wolfpack*, published jointly with Roger A. Freeman and released in 1989. From Zemke’s hand there is a second representation of the action. Merle Olmsted published in 1996 this second description two years after Col. Zemke passed away. The reason for the frequent description of this raid is an alleged dogfight between Colonel Zemke and the then Maj. Günther Rall. This story found its way into several depictions of history on the WWII air war, including two biographies of and by General Rall, in various internet presentations, interviews and discussions with Col. Zemke and General Rall, as well as pictorial depictions of the battle between Zemke and Rall and in a four-part film entitled *Germany’s Last Ace, Missions that Changed the War*.

In 1977 Francis S. Gabreski met Rall, now a retired general of the German Air Force, during a stay in the United States. During the conversation, the two found that they were both flying on May 12, 1944. Rall had achieved a total of 274 victories by this time, most of them in Russia. He was the most successful fighter pilot of the Luftwaffe. Maj. Rall was the commander of the Altitude Group II./JG 11 during the aerial battle on May 12.

In the Wetzlar area Rall was engaged in combat with P-47s and reported the destruction of a Thunderbolt. This victory was later recognized by the Luftwaffe. It was his 275th. After this victory, Rall was shot down by a P-47 in the Nassau area.

After the meeting between Gabreski and Rall, further research was carried out in the archive of the Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. Research in which Gen. Rall was not involved, as he assured this author. These investigations, carried out by Gabreski, revealed that Zemke



Map showing the route for the bomber stream and 56th FG on May 12, 1944. Included are the locations of the crashes of Rall, Zemke's wingmen Piper and Johnson, and the position of J.E. Greene's P-47 crash site. (From the author)

was reported to have been in the area of Giessen with his flight. Since Major Rall, commander of the II./JG 11, was also in this area, Wetzlar and Giessen are only 12 km apart, Gabreski wrote the loss of Zemke's wingmen was Rall's victory. However, there is no evidence on the American side for the victory Rall claimed and was confirmed by the German side. Gabreski also wanted to see if the records would support that Capt. Joe H. Powers shot down Major Rall after his alleged dogfight with Col. Zemke. It would be another 10 years, 1987, before Gen. Rall finally met Colonel Zemke.

Hubert Zemke Statement

Let us now turn to the further investigation of the events on May 12, 1944, as portrayed by Col. Zemke.

"We continued our cruise climb to conserve fuel, making 22,000 ft by the time the bend in the Rhine appeared below, the point at which the 61st Squadron flights turned north towards Marburg, the 62nd south for Mannheim, while I took the 63rd ahead in the direction of Giessen, White flight fanning out to the north and Red to the south.

"After some 40 miles I turned to begin a north-south patrol. All three of us scanned the hazy horizons of the blue void, periodically dropping a wing to get a better view below where we hoped to spot enemy aircraft forming up. No moving specks observed, I flipped the radio switch to the Bomber-Fighter channel for word of action elsewhere. Nothing. Flipping the switch back I just got the electrifying alarm. 'Fairbank, Break Left.' The instinctive reaction was violent movement of the stick and rudder pedals. As the Thunderbolt skidded round I was conscious of the all-too familiar white puffs – time-fused cannon shells exploding. In the next fraction of a second I glimpsed the shape of a Me 109 and then others above. Throttle to the firewall; cut in water injection. 'Fairbank, to Daily White



Luftwaffe ground-crew ("black men") positioning a Bf 109 G-6 "Kanonenvogel" equipped with the Rüstsatz VI underwing gondola cannon kit. Note the slats on the leading edge of the port wing. JG 2, France, late 1943. (From the author's collection)

Flight. Turn in tail, make a Lufbery.'

"Obviously outnumbered and until I had time to size up the situation, the protective turning circle with each of us covering the man ahead's rear was my reaction. It was a mistake; we were picking up speed too slowly and I could now see there were seven Me 109s about 5,000 feet above waiting to pick us off. They had advantages in altitude and speed and periodically launched an element of two to come down, shoot at us and then recover; the same tactics as we so often pulled on some unsuspecting Luftwaffe outfit. As we turned I made repeated calls for assistance hoping another of our flights was near. Suddenly a single Me 109 cut across our circle and took a deflection shot at Johnson's plane. Flames enveloped the fuselage and the Thunderbolt turned over and disappeared from



A Hispano Aviación HA-1112 (c/n 156 C.4K-87 (D-FMBB), "FM+BB"), a license-built Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-2. Rebuilt as a G-6 by the EADS/Messerschmitt Foundation, Germany, with a Daimler-Benz DB 605 engine. (From the author's collection)

view. Where was help? I called again. Piper and I tightened our circle.

“Desperation rather than fear gripped me as I looked for an opening to escape. If we attempted to dive our initial acceleration would be sluggish and they could nail us before we built up sufficient speed. Then the lone Me 109 repeated its previous act: diving down across our circle he opened up with a deflection shot on Piper. Again, out of the corner of my eye, I saw smoke and flames erupt. Two down, one to go. Fear took hold, in that racing jumble of thought the prospect of death spun by. Is this the exit for Mrs. Zemke’s little Hoobart?”

“Perhaps my dread would have been all the greater had I known that the pilot I had just seen despatch Johnson and Piper was the third ranking ace of the Luftwaffe, Maj. Günter Rall, commanding II./JG 11, with more than 200 victories to his credit. ... With violent movements of the controls, I rolled UN-Z over with a fast aileron flip and headed vertically for the ground, barrel rolling as I went to make a difficult target for my pursuers. Down, full power, into the realms of compressibility. By the time the altimeter had unwound a couple of times and the airspeed indicator had hit the peg, the Thunderbolt was rumbling and vibrating so much I expected it to fly apart. It was time to start recovery; cutting power, centralizing the stick to stop the barrel roll, and starting a long and gentle pull back to bottom out at around 5,000 feet. A quick glance over each shoulder and a buck to clear my tail. To my relief no frontal view of a Messerschmitt in hot pursuit or blinking cannon. Perhaps they couldn’t catch me; perhaps they thought I was out of control.”

Analysis

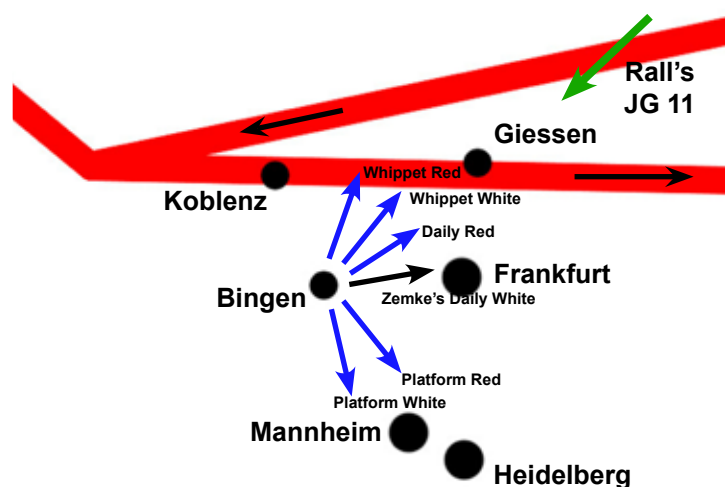
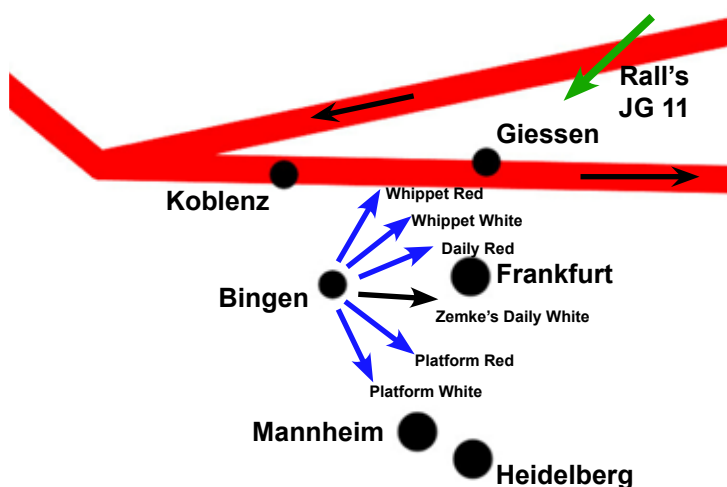
Zemke’s *Daily White* flight planned to cover a distance of about 40 miles from Bingen before turning to a north-south direction of flight. Zemke himself talks about patrol flights being primarily along an east-west line and of some changes

in direction. Both the statements above describe a patrol of the area between Bingen and Giessen. During this flight, Zemke’s three-plane flight was attacked suddenly by seven Me 109s. The Germans, with superior numbers and the advantage of the tactical surprise, succeeded the shooting down both of Zemke’s wingmen (Piper and Johnson). Zemke, on the other hand, successfully managed to escape. This dogfight has been portrayed in both presentations as occurring between Frankfurt and Giessen. In addition, in the second essay, Zemke mentions for the first time a command, Lt. Col. Gabreski is said to have given Capt. Joe Powers. Powers was to rush to the aid of Col. Zemke with the eight P-47s of the *Icejug White* flight and the *Icejug Red* flight should the need arise.

However, these stories need to be corrected in parts. A detailed study of the records of Preston Piper’s and Willard Johnson’s crash locations clearly shows that the dogfight took place east of Heidelberg, much further south than reported in the mission records. Two pilots of the first group of German Fighter Squadron 5, abbreviated I./JG 5, shot down Zemke’s wingmen. This unit was stationed at the time in Herzogenaurach near Nuremberg and was part of the high-altitude group of the II./JG 11.

Willard Johnson was shot down by Lt. Walter Krupinski at 11.52 a.m. Krupinski had recently been a squadron captain in the I./JG 5. He had earned the Knight’s Cross in Russia and, together with Günther Rall, had been transferred from the eastern front to the homeland defense. This Thunderbolt was Krupinski’s 181st victory. At the end of the war he had been credited with 197 aerial victories. After the war Krupinski joined the German Air Force and was eventually promoted to general.

Lt. Otto Jahn scored the second victory (Piper) at 11.55 a.m. Lt. Jahn had been a member of I./JG 5 since 1942 and was also an experienced fighter pilot. Shortly before the end of the war, he was awarded the Knight’s Cross.



The figures above show two possible fan distributions of Group A, Fairbank flight, on May 12, 1944, as described in the literature on the engagement. The one on the left follows the standard, evenly dispersed fan description. The one on the right shows an unevenly dispersed distribution that would concentrate more fighters over the bomber-stream path, but leaving Platform flights more vulnerable. This later distribution is more consistent in explaining Zemke’s description of his patrolling in a north-south direction in order to close the gap between his flight and Platform Red and explains why his wingmen were shot down in the Heidelberg area.

In Zemke's narrative and the associated literature, the first wingman to fall has been identified as 2nd Lt. Willard D. Johnson, while Lt. Col. Preston Piper allegedly became the second victim of German fighter(s). There is a note in the Missing Air Crew Report (MACR) 4806, according to which Preston Piper was shot down first. Another discrepancy in the MACR is with the position of Zemke's flight. This report indicates Col. Zemke's *Daily White* flight was positioned south of 1st Lt. J. Carroll Wakefield, the leader of the *Daily Red* flight, and not north, as told in Zemke's narrative.

The Crash of Zemke's Wingmen

Lt. Col. Preston Piper bailed out of his stricken fighter and landed in a tree between Lobenfeld and Spechbach. The pilot had burns on his hands and legs. He was taken prisoner by civilians and brought into the house of the Christian family. Mrs. Christian applied an old home remedy. She rubbed the burns with raw potatoes and covered them.

2nd Lt. Willard D. Johnson also bailed out of his aircraft and landed near the monastery of Lobenfeld. He also had burns. Hilde Holder's husband and a soldier, Erwin Gimber, took him captive. Johnson and Piper were later taken to hospitals where their burns were treated.

The crash sites of the two Thunderbolts were in the eastern part of the district of Heidelberg. The P-47, *Lady Jane*, flown by Lt. Col. Piper struck between Epfenbach and Schimel. *Louisiana Pirate* flown by 2nd Lt. Johnson drilled into the Seberg near Spechbach. The crashes of the two P-47s at Epfenbach-Reichartshausen and Spechbach-Lobenfeld prove clearly that at the time of the fight, Zemke was not in the Giessen area, but east of Heidelberg.

The Zemke Fan

Group 'A' of the Zemke fan was composed of six flights of the 61st, 62nd and 63rd Fighter Squadrons. The spread of the flights took place from north to south in the alternating red flight – white flight. 1st Lt. Robert J. Rankin with the *Whippet Red* flight formed the northernmost flight, followed by Capt. Paul A. Conger with the *Whippet White* flight. In the center of the fan, 1st Lt. J. Carroll Wakefield flew with the *Daily Red* flight and Colonel Zemke with the *Daily White* flight. The last set was composed of 1st Lt. Joseph Walker leading *Platform Red* flight and Capt. Felix D. Williamson with the *Platform White* flight.

The Zemke Fan, flown on 12 May, is often described in literature as an evenly divided semicircle of 180 degrees, in which six flights of four aircraft are fanned from an origin point in different directions. The flights should patrol in their designated sectors, scouting and engaging enemy fighters. This representation of the fan is based on a symmetrical division of the flights.

Another variant, presented in two documents and the recollections of Col. Zemke, seems more likely. According to the Narrative of Operations and the mission report for Group 'A', the four flights of the 61st and 63rd Fighter Squadrons fanned out to the northeast direction from the Bingen rally point. The two flights of the 62nd Fighter Squadron were flown



High scoring aces of the 56th Fighter Group, Robert S. Johnson (27), Hub Zemke (17.8) and Walker M. Mahurin (22.8) pose in front of Zemke's P-47 (NARA photo from the AAHS archives)

in a southern direction. This created two distinctly strong wings with a large gap between the fourth and fifth flights, resulting in an asymmetric fan, whose main focus lay in the northeast. In this variant, most of the flights were immediately in front of the bombers stream. The Americans were aware of the distribution of the German fighter forces and their main directions of attack. It is understandable that an attack from the northeast was likely to be expected, as actually happened. Because of these two variants of the fan, the result is Col. Zemke's flight path also has two possible variations.

Zemke's Flight Path

In telling his story, Zemke has provided two different descriptions of his flight direction. According to the description in the book published jointly with Roger A. Freeman, Zemke flew first for about 10 minutes to the northeast in the direction of Giessen. He and his *Daily White* flight covered a distance of about 40 miles. This was followed by a flight in a southern direction, which led to the attack of the Me 109s. There is no documentation on the length for this flight segment. It seems to have been shorter than the first flight segment. However, if you extend this flight direction further south, you will arrive in the area of Heidelberg, where the actual attack by the Me 109s occurred. This long north-south flight segment by Zemke's flight could have been purposely made to close the gap in the patrol area between the fourth and fifth flight.

According to Zemke's narrative in the essay published by Merle Olmsted, however, it can be concluded that he flew from Bingen possibly in a southeast direction with his flight. Although it mentions the breakdown of the flights in the book with a focus on the northeast and called the flight direction as toward Giessen, there is also the direction statement of E. S. E., which contradicts this. Which and how many changes of direction were made during the patrol and how long the duration of each segment were made by Zemke's *Daily White* flight to the engagement with the German fighters cannot be



Capt. Walker "Bud" Mahurin of the 56th Fighter Group standing on the port wing of his P-47 Thunderbolt, conversing with its crew chief, SSgt. John E. Barnes. The aircraft had been "bought" courtesy of war bonds purchased (to a value approximately equivalent to the cost of a fighter) by the citizens of Atlantic City, New Jersey. Consequently, the name painted on the aircraft was chosen by Atlantic City. Handwritten on slide: "Mahurin Halesworth" on UN+M. (From the author's collection)

determined exactly.

It is not possible today to establish which flight path Zemke actually took: Bingen – Giessen – Heidelberg or Bingen – Heidelberg. The first variation is to the preferred. Whatever it was, in any case, Zemke arrived with his flight in the Heidelberg area and was attacked there by the seven Me 109 of the I/JG 5, as the crashes of his wingmen prove. When writing his accounts in the late 1980s and 1990s, Zemke relied on the documents favoring the Giessen location, as had been done during the research from 1977. This localization has led to false conclusions in the subsequent reconstruction of events.

Zemke Statement Continued:

"Shaken and damp with sweat, I turned the faithful UN-Z westwards, putting on altitude again as rapidly as I could and oscillating my head as it had never turned before. I was now conscious that the R(adio)/T(elephone) was filled with the staccato calls of combat; the rest of the group must also be seeing plenty of action. Near Wiesbaden, just as I passed 12.000 feet, the adrenalin surged. I caught sight of four Me 109s coming on my tail. ... Full throttle, water injection and into a barrel roll, heading for the ground in a steep dive. Once more this tactic appeared to work for, when pulling out a few thousand feet above the fields there was no sign of my assailants. This was quite enough activity for one day and a 290 degree magnetic course was set for England, climbing to gain altitude as fast as possible and twisting my neck as never before. I had just topped 20.000 feet when a quick glance down as I crossed the Rhine south of Coblenz, picking up four 109s circling about 5.000 feet below. ...

"I started to circle to make the attack when another glance revealed several more aircraft assembling on the original four. Caution reigned as I continued to circle and watched more



Republic P-47D-28-RA Thunderbolt, 42-28543, color photo, 56th Fighter Group, nose art "Pat", code UN+V. (From the author's collection)

fighters join the formation down below. I had wound up directly above a Luftwaffe assembly point, just what we had been seeking to do in developing the Zemke Fan – but instead of a sizeable bunch of Wolfpack eager beavers poised for the kill there was, ironically, only the lone originator of the scheme. My throttle hand depressed the radio microphone switch: 'Fairbank Leader to all Fairbank and Subway ships. I need help fast. Angels 20. South Coblenz.' I continued to call for help as the force below me grew to an estimated thirty in number, a whole fighter Group. With each orbit they gained altitude and as they went up so did I, to maintain my advantage. For more than fifteen minutes I continued to circle, climbing and calling for assistance. Eventually I topped 29.000 feet and contrails began to stream back from the Thunderbolt. They should have given me away to the Jerry formation but the contrails did enable two 61st Squadron pilots, Lieutenants Rankin and Thornton [sic], to spot me and radio their presence."

"As soon as the two red-nosed P-47s appeared below and around a half mile away, I told them to give me top cover while making my bounce. So, wing over and down into a fairly steep dive, picking out a lonesome Me 109 on the outer portion of the enemy formation. By the time I was behind in firing position it presented a sixty to ninety degree deflection shot and over two rings of lead were laid off in the sight before squeezing the trigger. From the tracers my aim was seen to be too far ahead of my target so I continued firing, letting the 109 fly right through my bullet pattern. Strikes were seen along the fuselage before superior speed necessitated an abrupt pull back on the stick to avoid ramming my victim. Zooming up in a climbing turn, a quick peep over the shoulder revealed the 109 in flames and the pilot baling out. Foolishly I let elation momentarily take charge: 'I got him,' I yelled into the radio, only to hear an abrupt Fairbank, Break Left.

The senses reeled from elation to fear as once more instantaneous movement of the controls brought me round to find four Me 109s coming straight towards me. Turning a half roll to the west with full power and a dive, I was ready to outrun them if they pursued. A squint back revealed I was again alone. ...



Hubert Zemke, Günther Rall and Gabby Gabreski in a photo taken in the 1980s. (From the Zemke collection)

Analysis

This part of the account is based on an engagement between Giessen and Frankfurt and indicates Zemke's escape direction was to the west. But, it is more likely that he has departed from the Heidelberg area in a northwesterly direction. There were, for example, the P-47s of the group 'B', in which he could find safety. In addition, Zemke encountered on his return flight to four Me 109, which were part of a climbing Me 109 squad. While Zemke was circling over the group, he called for help. His emergency call was heard by various pilots of his fighter group. Only 1st Lt. Robert J. Rankin and 2nd Lt. Cleon C. Thomson managed to find Zemke and hasten to help him. Zemke shot a Me 109 out of the climbing group, bringing his victory count to 10.25 victories. The German pilot succeeded in parachuting. This unknown Me 109 must be located somewhere north or northwest of Frankfurt am Main. Such incidents were usually recorded in the War Diary of the respective unit. Since these documents were almost completely destroyed at the end of the war, systematic research is no longer possible. Presumably Col. Zemke shot down a Me 109 of the II./JG 27 or the III./JG 1. These groups each lost a machine during air engagements on May 12. The names of the pilots and the crash places are not available. The time of the Me 109 attack is indicated as 12:30 p.m.

Remarks on Timing

German documents regarding the two P-47 victories over Lt. Col. Preston Piper and 2nd Lt. Willard D. Johnson are indicated at 11:52 and 11:55 a.m., while documents on Zemke's victory record it occurred at 12:30 p.m. These times should not be taken at face value. They indicate a time gap of 38 minutes between the two engagements. However, this time gap is far too big. Zemke stated in an interview the maximum duration of the fight was about 20 minutes. A calculation of fuel consumption supports this "shorter" period between the engagements.

Powers and Vital against Rall?

Zemke's wingmen were not shot down by Major Rall. Also, the assertion that Capt. Joe H. Powers received the order

for his two flights to help Zemke, resulting in the engagement and shoot down of Rall is fraught with strong uncertainties.

Powers belonged to Lt. Col. Gabreski led group 'B' and was the leader of the *Icejug White* flight and the *Icejug Red* flight. These eight Thunderbolts were used in the southern area of the group 'B'. 1st Lt. Jack Ellis Greene, *Icejug Red* Flight, achieved a victory over a Me 109 over Mannheim, and not Frankfurt, as reported by U.S. sources. A short time later, Greene had to bail out of his stricken fighter and was captured on the premises of a Mannheim factory. In the course of the following dogfights, the strength of the two flights depleted so strongly that Powers could only have carried out the claimed support assignment for Zemke with his wingman Vitale. According to the combat reports, Powers and Vitale can only be verified in the area of Mannheim. However, since both had jointly shot down a Me 109 and the bulk of the known crash sites of Me 109s lay in the area northwest to northeast of Frankfurt am Main, they must also have been in this airspace. The alleged order to rush to help Zemke, however, cannot be substantiated by any known documented evidence.

A comparison of the combat reports of Powers and Vitale only shows a partial over-agreement with Rall's narrative. There is talk of a fall from high altitude to near the ground. This will be a five to ten minute chase at tree-top height. Until then, the description of the Americans with Rall's narrative is congruent.

From here, the discrepancies begin. In contrast to Rall, Vitale describes the fact that he was shot at by the German pilot and that this pilot apparently attempted an emergency landing. Powers stated the Me 109 finally plunged into a small field, skidded along the belly and then flipped on its back. When reading the combat reports, it appears that the German pilot, who was shot down by Powers and Vitale, was still in the machine when it struck the ground. This completely contradicts Rall's narrative, incidentally reported by four pursuing P-47s. However, a German eyewitness testifies only to two pursuers. A pull up of the Me 109 and the following parachute jump by Rall is not mentioned in either reports. Despite these contradictions, the descriptions of Powers and Vitale fit most closely into the story of Major Rall.

Almost exclusively pilots of the 56th Fighter Group were positioned to attack Rall. Some of the flights of the 56th Fighter Group reached the Nassau area. They must have been involved in aerial combat with the Me 109s of Major Rall's II./JG 11. The German documentation also discusses fighting with Thunderbolts. Rall's top-cover group lost a total of six Me 109s during the operation around noon, including the complete staff swarm. The commander of the II./JG 11 is merely the most prominent loss of the group. Judging by the division of the Zemke Fan and the action reports, 1st Lt. Robert Rankin, Captain Paul A. Conger and 1st Lt. Anthony A. Cavallo would have been in the best position. Rankin, F/O Steven Rick, 2nd Lt. Cleon Thomson, 2nd Lt. Herman King, 2nd Lt. Arthur C. Maul and 1st Lt. J. Carroll Wakefield report kills of Me 109s. However, none of their engagement reports closely matches to the portrayal of the incident by Rall.

1st Lt. Kenneth Chetwood and 1st Lt. William F. Tanner

of the 353rd Fighter Group jointly achieved a victory over a Me 109 flown by Sergeant Hans Kastenhuber, Stab II./JG 11, who was killed trying to bail out of his stricken aircraft.

An extensive review of P-51 Mustang pilots also does not result in any corroboration of the engagements. Action reports for May 12 of four Mustang groups claiming Me 109 victories were researched. The 4th Fighter Group reported 10 kills the 352nd Fighter Group scored six victories, the 354th Fighter Group reported six confirmed kills and the 357th Fighter Group 14 kills.

In view of this situation and the contradictory reports, it remains unclear who shot down Major Rall. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the report of Powers and Vitale, at least in the first half, is still the best fit the portrayal of Rall.

The Return flight

The pilots of the 56th Fighter Group returned to their base partly individually, partly in flights. Group 'A' members crossed the coast between Ostend and Katwijk between 12.55 and 1.16 p.m. and landed at about 2.03 p.m. in Boxted. The flights of the Group 'B' crossed the coastline between Boulogne and Walcheren between 1:10 and 1:35 p.m. and arrived at Boxted at 2.00 pm. Colonel Zemke and 1st Lt. Anthony S. Cavallo returned to England alone. Lieutenant Rankin with his wingman had to land in Manston due to a lack of fuel.

Summary

Zemke's Wolfpack was the most successful fighter group on that day with 18 kills. Lieutenant Rankin wrote group history. He reported five victories, Wakefield three and Cavallo two. Rankin was the second American pilot in the European Theatre to have shot down five enemy planes during a single mission. The most prominent victim of the Germans was Major Rall. Six American pilots reported the damage of seven German fighters. Three P-47s received anti-aircraft strikes.

Three Thunderbolt pilots of the 56th Fighter Group were shot down and captured: Lt. Col. Preston Piper, 2nd Lt. Willard D. Johnson and 1st Lt. Jack E. Greene. All three survived the war. In total, the Americans lost four Thunderbolts in this deployment. The fourth P-47 belonged to 1st Lt. Daniel D. Hagarty, 78th Fighter Group. Hagarty was shot down by Lt. Gunther Buchholz, 6th/JG 1, in the Eifel region, and was also captured.

In the opinion of Col. Hubert Zemke, the fan was an outstanding tactical success. However, it was found that in the face of a massive opposing force, the strength of the flights scattered over a wide area in groups of four aircraft were too weak for adequate defense. The next Zemke Fan was flown on May 22, 1944, in a modified form. A third Zemke Fan followed on August 16, 1944. Colonel Zemke had left the 56th Fighter Group to take command of the 479th Fighter Group equipped with P-38 Lightnings prior to the third use of the Zemke Fan. ➔

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