

Stuka-Attack on HMS Carlisle and HMS Panther on 9 October 1943

A summary by LtCol Hans Peter Eisenbach, Author of the book "Fronteinsätze eines Stuka-Fliegers"

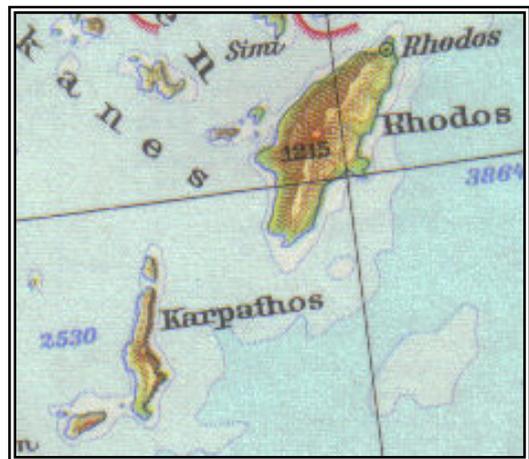
This summary is based on the original flight data of a German Stuka pilot who participated as a member of I. Group Stuka Wing 3 (I.StG3) in the whole Aegean campaign in October/November 1943. The Pilot's Flying Log Book of this aviator with all his Stuka missions in the Mediterranean theatre of operations and the East



Front between September 1943 and March 1944 was first published in 2009¹. During the war in the Aegean this Stuka pilot flew 22 Stuka-sorties within I.StG3. The flight time of the missions was between 175 – 195 minutes and most of the targets were on the island of LEROS. Only when I.StG3 attacked HMS Penelope and HMS Panther the flight time was extremely long, 245 / 230 minutes, as the Stukas had to fly a distance of 440 kilometres from their air base on the Greek mainland to the Straits of Scarpanto (Karpathos) south of Rhodos, where they expected to hit the British warships. In 2010 the author of this summary started to reconstruct the Stuka attacks on 9 October 1943, as there were too many caveats and discrepancies in the available literature. The basic cause for this is the non-availability of official German documents of the *Luftwaffe*, which have been destroyed by end of WW II and the tight attack plan of I. and II. Group Stuka Wing 3, which attacked the warships with a separation of 5

minutes. The Pilot's Flying Log Book of the Stuka pilot is now a highly reliable source of information which enables the author to draw an accurate picture of the events at "High-noon" on October 9 in Scarpanto Strait.

At beginning of October 1943 British naval task forces of cruisers and destroyers executed missions in the Aegean Sea in order to search and destroy German forces, which planned to land on the Dodecanese islands. However the British strategists misjudged the German Air power and threat represented by the Stukas. In July 1943 the Luftwaffe deployed two groups of Stukas to Greece. I. Stukageschwader 3 was based in MEGARA west of Athens, II. Stukageschwader 3 was deployed to ARGOS on the Peloponnese Peninsula. British military intelligence was not aware of these positions. They assumed the Stukas in Crete and Rhodos². For the battle of Kefalonia I.StG3 deployed in September 1943 to ARAXOS, but redeployed to their main operating base in MEGARA via PARAMITHIA on 27th September



1943. On 1st October 1943 Luftwaffe operational dive bombers in Greece are reported to have 69 Stukas. After the battle of KOS on 3rd and

¹ Hans Peter Eisenbach: "Fronteinsätze eines Stuka Fliegers, Mittelmeer und Ostfront 1943-44", Helios Verlag Germany 2009, ISBN 978-3-938208-96-0. Peter Eisenbach is a retired Lieutenant-Colonel of the German Air Force.

² Also post-war publications mentioned that I.StG3 operated from Crete or Rhodos. But this was never the case in 1943 except on 2.-4. October 1943 where only few missions were flown from Crete. From 5 October to 17 November I.StG3 has flown a minimum of 19 air raids. They all were flown from / to MEGARA. The minimum flight time was 170 minutes, the maximum flight time 245 minutes. The distance from MEGARA to LEROS and SAMOS is 320 kilometres, to the Straits of Scarpanto 440 to 460 kilometres.

4th October³ these Stukas attacked British warships in the Aegean Sea. The first mission of I.StG3 against the Royal Navy was flown on 6th October. The Stukas started in MEGARA at 10.20A hrs. After 95 minutes they reached the British surface striking force deep in the Scarpanto Straits. After the heavy und sustained attacks the Stukas of I.StG3 returned to MEGARA where they landed at 13.45A hrs. The next day reconnaissance aircraft discovered again British naval task forces of cruisers and destroyers retiring through the Scarpanto Straits south of RHODOS. Eighteen Ju 87 of I.StG3 took off on 7th October at 08.10 hrs (German A-Time) and followed immediately the warships. At 09.55 hrs (German A-Time) they sighted the armada. Then the cruiser and destroyers were attacked and the Stukas badly damaged the cruiser PENELOPE⁴. The Stukas arrived back in MEGARA at 12.15 hrs. During the attack the Stuka with the call-sign S7+OL was shot down by ship guns. German Air-sea rescue service could pick up the pilot Wolfgang Wedel and his wireless operator Georg Scheller injured south-west of RHODOS. 48 hours later the Stukas of I. StG3 carried out another lethal strike against the Royal Navy.

A force under H.M.S. CARLISLE (Captain H. F. Nalder, R.N.) carried out a sweep on the nights of 7th / 8th and 8th / 9th October to intercept German forces attempting to reach the Dodecanese from the Piraeus. No sightings were made and in the morning at 05.15 hrs on the 9th the force was heading southeast in order to withdraw through the straits between Scarpanto and Rhodos to Alexandria for refuelling. Strong combat air patrols for the ships were available. Almost continuous fighter cover was provided throughout the morning⁵ till 11.55 hrs by 1st Fighter Group / 12th US Fighter Wing from GAMBUT / Libya. The fifth formation of Lightning's P-38 arrived this morning over the warships at 11.00 hrs flying at 10.000 feet. The situation seemed to be calm as the aircraft circled over the speeding ships. But the deadly threat was already on its way – ready to attack. German long-range sea reconnaissance aircraft, Arados, sighted the

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|----------|----|-------|------|-----|
| I./StG 3 | OL | 5.10 | 0850 | 185 |
| Megara | EH | 6.10. | 1345 | 205 |
| Megara | EH | 7.10. | 1215 | 245 |
| " | EH | 9.10 | 1150 | 230 |
| " | EH | 10.10 | 1635 | 185 |
| " | EH | 11.10 | 1400 | 175 |

ships in the early morning of 9th October and reported their position. The German Stuka attack planners assessed time, speed and heading⁵ of the ships. The conclusion was that the ships will be for the next two hours within the range of the Stukas in MEGARA (I.StG3) and ARGOS (II.StG3) and a successful⁶ air attack in the assumed target area south of RHODOS would be possible. The Air Task

³ For the Battle of KOS I.StG3 deployed on 2nd October to Kastelli/Crete. They redeployed on 5th October to MEGARA via LEROS, where they attacked the harbour of Lakki/Portolago. The Stukas destroyed three ships – Legnano, MZ 73 and Porto Di Roma.

⁴ For more details of the damage of HMS Penelope see: Smith/Walker, War in the Aegean, 1974 / 2008

⁵ 1. Formation: 08.50-10.10 2.) 09.45-11.05 3) 10.10-11.00 4) 10.40-11.30 5) 11.00-11.55
see: Smith/Walker, War in the Aegean, 1974 / 2008 page 143-144

⁶ The Stuka attack planner could not have an accurate air picture of the enemy's fighter situation for the next two hours. They were not aware of the US fighter threat and a forecast of a temporary fighter gap would even be nowadays impossible. The availability of effective long range air surveillance radar and electronic warfare equipment by the Germans in this area is quite questionable. The Stuka Pilots suffered heavy losses during the whole war as the slow Stukas were easy targets for enemy air defence and fighters. But the fact that Stuka missions were "suicidal...in face of

Order was given immediately and the Stukas in MEGARA reacted promptly. All 26 serviceable "Doras" of I. Group Stuka Wing 3 lifted off⁷ at 08.00 hrs⁸ (German A-Time) to attack the British task force consisting of the cruiser HMS *Carlisle* and destroyers *Panther*, *Petard*, *Rockwood* and the Greek destroyer HHMS *Miaoulis*. After a flight time of 110 minutes, the Ju 87 from I.StG3 reached at 09.50 hrs (German A-Time, 11.50C) the sea area near the small island of Saria north of Karpathos. Now the distance to the British warships was approximately 16 nautical miles (30 Km). After sighting the British task force the three squadrons of I. StG3 started at 11.55C (09.55A) hrs their final approach to attack the ships⁹. The pilots in the slow-moving Stukas could not know that just in this moment the US fighters turned away from the British surface striking force heading south-west back to their air base in GAMBUT¹⁰. Thus there was no air cover by allied fighters¹¹ to protect the warships which were proceeding south through Scarpanto Strait. Unaware of their fortune of war and the brief fighter gap of some ten minutes the Stukas arrived at 11.56 hrs overhead the ships without prior warning and commenced their attacks with great accuracy. One Stuka after another dived almost vertically with the banshee wail of their sirens to the first and largest target – HMS *Carlisle*¹². Evasion manoeuvres were in vain and the *Carlisle* was soon in trouble. The cruiser got several direct hits and was near-missed by two other bombs and was smoking from the stern. Now the bulk of the Stukas concentrated on HMS *Panther*. Although the ship guns put up a tremendous barrage the 1540-ton destroyer *Panther* suffered two direct hits and several near misses almost at once. The explosions were much worse than those of the previous Stuka attack.¹³ Her back broken, she sank at 12.05 hrs¹⁴ in two separate halves at 35°48' N 27°36' E. 33 sailors were killed. Not later than 10.10 hrs (German A-Time / 12.10 C-Time) the Stukas of I.StG3 had left the target area and landed safely at 11.50 hrs (German A-Time) in Megara. During the attack they only lost one aircraft. Unteroffizier Martens (Pilot)

the powerfully armed Lightnings" (Smith/Walker, page143) was no argument for the Luftwaffe not to sent the Stukas. The crews were sent ruthless to their missions. The average life time of a Stuka pilot was 20 combat missions.

⁷ See John Weal "Junkers Ju 87 Stukageschwader of North Africa and the Mediterranean", Osprey Combat Aircraft 6, Paperback, July 1998, ISBN: 978-1-855327-22-1, page 83

⁸ See Flight Log of the Pilot of the Ju 87 S7+EH in: "Fronteinsätze eines Stuka Fliegers", page 72.

⁹ Just in this moment Chief Petty Officer Frank Forster on HMS *Panther* went to the Wireless Office to ask the PO Telegraphist if he might switch on the ship's radio to receive the **BBC Overseas news**. The Telegraphist warned him of the imminent air attack and as Forster made up his way to his action station...the ship's gun opened up.

¹⁰ The fighter pilots seemed not be greatly interested in the results of the mission. See: War diary 37th FSQ / 14th FGp

¹¹ „Towards midday, several minutes elapsed during which there was no air cover. The Luftwaffe chose this moment to attack. But help was on its way as Lightning's of 37th Fighter Squadron approached under the command of Major William Leverette." In: Anthony Rogers "Churchill's Folly - Leros and the Aegean", page 86

¹² Chief Petty Officer Frank Forster (HMS *Panther*): "There was a series of heavy explosions which might have been caused by either our guns or enemy bombs...the ship was apparently undamaged. I climbed...to the upper deck to find out what had happened and was told that the cruiser "CARLISLE" had been hit. ... The guns suddenly opened up again and now we were the target for the enemy planes."

¹³ Chief Petty Officer Frank Forster: "I ran to my action station...and there was a very heavy explosion and the ship lurched... The ship had been damaged in a previous action by enemy bombs...but this was much worse..." in: Anthony Rogers "Churchill's Folly - Leros and the Aegean", page 86

¹⁴ David Brown „Warship Losses of WW II“ page 98. Brown mentions, that HMS *Panther* sunk at 12.05 hrs.

and his wireless operator Oberfeldwebel Kröger with the Ju 87 call-sign S7+AK of 2. Squadron StG3 were shot down by ship anti air artillery.

In the meantime a new threat was en route. Stukas of II.StG3 from ARGOS were approaching the convoy from northwest. The time over target was scheduled for 10.15A (12.15C) hrs. Simultaneously seven Lightning's of 37th Fighter Squadron from Gambut / Libya¹⁵ under the command of Major William Leverette approached from southwest the island of Karpathos, still 15 miles distant from the British warships. Too far away and too late to prevent the loss of HMS Panther and the other damage caused by I.StG3 but just in time to counter-attack the *Luftwaffe's* second echelon. When the US Fighters reached the convoy, the Stukas just passed north of Saria. Shortly after they were intercepted by the Lightning's. Leverette¹⁶:

"Our Squadron took off at 10:30 hours. We sighted the British warships at almost exactly noon, approximately fifteen miles east of Cape Valoca on Isle of Scarpanto. I contacted them on their frequency, and was told that they were under attack. I could see that the cruiser was smoking from the stern. During our first orbit around the convoy, while flying a south-westerly course at 8000 feet, Lieutenant Sprinkle called out "Bogeys at one o'clock, slightly high, approaching the convoy from the north-west". We immediately changed course to pass behind the bogeys and began a gradual climb. Shortly thereafter, we identified the bogeys as Ju-87s, in three flights, totalling approximately twenty-five. We attacked the Ju-87s at about 1215." "In the dog fights, lasting approximately fifteen minutes, fifteen JU-87s (and one JU-88) were shot from the skies by the attacking Flight and the top cover had accounted for another JU-87 which brought the grand total to seventeen." "We engaged the Ju 87s until they passed over the south coast of Rhodos at approximately 1230 hours."

On the approach of the Lightings the Stukas of II.StG3 jettisoned their bombs and diverted for the lower tip of Rhodos Island while they were attacked by the fighters. The *Luftwaffe* lost in fact less than 17 Ju 87. German sources confirm a minimum of 6 Stukas (Call-sign: GM, DN, FP, KP, MP and AU)¹⁷ and one Ju 88 shot down by the fighter attack. H.M.S. CARLISLE was towed to Alexandria by ROCKWOOD. One officer and nineteen sailors were killed and seventeen men wounded. H.M.S. CARLISLE was written off as a total loss. I. StG3 operated during the whole battle for LEROS from their air base in MEGARE. The last mission in Greece was flown on 17th November 1943. The target was the island of SAMOS. The defenders had only few heavy machine guns, so the air strike was carried out almost undisturbed. The air strike caused very heavy damages to military and civilian population, buildings and infrastructures. On 25th November I.StG3 deployed via SKOPJE, MOSTAR, SARAJEWO, MARKERSDORF and WERTHEIM to DORPAT (Estonia) where they arrived on 27th February 1944¹⁸.

¹⁵ Gambut Airfield 31°52'04.26"N 24°30'14.28"E

¹⁶ Major William Leverette, Combat Report and 37th Fighter SQN 14th Fighter GP war diary.

¹⁷ See „Fronteinsätze eines Stuka-Fliegers“, page 73:

S7+GM (Werknummer 100375) Lt. Rolf Metzger und Uffz. Hans Sonnemann, 09.10.43 gefallen bei Rhodos. // **S7+DN** (Werknummer 100380) Uffz. Heinrich Manger und Gefr. Erich Primissl, 09.10.43 vermisst so von Rhodos. // **S7+FP** (Werknummer 110322) Uffz. Josef Rose und Gefr. Franz Neumann, 09.10.43 vermisst sw Rhodos. // **S7+KP** (Werknummer 100374) Lt. Horst Skabreck und Uffz. Georg Peters, 09.10.43 vermisst sw Rhodos. // **S7+MP** (Werknummer 110336) Lt. Heinz Spielmann, gefallen 09.10.43 sw von Rhodos, Bordfunker Rudolf Malina, verwundet. // **S7+AU** (Werknummer 110535) Hauptmann Peter von Heidebrand und Uffz. Herbert Bluschke, 09.10.43 vermisst südöstlich von Rhodos // **Ju 87D-3** (Werknummer 100378) Oberfeldwebel Hans Birkner nach Notlandung in Rhodos tödlich verunglückt. // Leutnant Otto Hecht und Hans Krajacic verwundet.“

¹⁸ See: “Fronteinsätze eines Stuka Fliegers, Mittelmeer und Ostfront 1943-44”, Helios Verlag Germany 2009, ISBN 978-3-938208-96-0.