

= Mato Dukovac =

Mato Dukovac ( 23 October 1918 ? September 1990 ) was the leading Croatian fighter ace of World War II , credited with between 40 and 44 confirmed kills . He joined the Air Force of the Independent State of Croatia following the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941 , and then the Luftwaffe , with which he flew combat missions on the Eastern Front . His tours of the Eastern Front spanned October and November 1942 , February to June 1943 , and October 1943 to March 1944 . He defected to the Soviet Union on 20 September 1944 , and was returned to Yugoslavia in November 1944 . He worked as a flight instructor for the Yugoslav Air Force in Pančevo and Zadar before defecting to Italy in April 1945 .

Dukovac left Italy in 1946 and became a captain in the Syrian Air Force . During the 1948 Arab ? Israeli War , he flew combat missions against Israel in an American T @-@ 6 Texan . Following the war , he emigrated to Canada and started a family there . He died in Toronto in 1990 .

= = Early life = =

Dukovac was born on 23 October 1918 in the town of Surčin , near Zemun , then part of the Kingdom of Croatia @-@ Slavonia , Austria @-@ Hungary . He was an avid glider pilot before he entered the 67th class of the Royal Yugoslav Military Academy in Belgrade in 1937 . He graduated on 1 April 1940 with the rank of potporučnik , and commenced pilot training at the 1st Pilot School in Pančevo in October of that year .

= = World War II = =

= = = Croatian Air Force Legion = = =

During the German @-@ led Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941 , Dukovac served with the 2nd Squadron of the Royal Yugoslav Air Force ( Serbo @-@ Croatian : Vazduhoplovstvo Vojske Kraljevine Jugoslavije , VVKJ ) at an airfield in Velika Gorica . After the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was defeated and occupied by the Axis powers , Dukovac became a member of the armed forces of the newly created Independent State of Croatia ( Croatian : Nezavisna Država Hrvatska , NDH ) . He joined the Air Force of the Independent State of Croatia ( Croatian : Zrakoplovstvo Nezavisne Države Hrvatske , ZNDH ) on 29 April 1941 with the rank of poručnik , and was initially posted to the personnel department of ZNDH headquarters .

On 27 June 1941 , the Croatian Legion ( Croatian : Hrvatska Legija ) was formed to fight alongside Germany during its invasion of the Soviet Union , and on 12 July the air component of the Legion was formed . Known as the Croatian Air Force Legion ( Croatian : Hrvatska Zrakoplovna Legija , HZL ) it consisted of a bomber group and a fighter group . The HZL formed part of the German Luftwaffe ; its members swore an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler , were subject to German disciplinary regulations and wore Luftwaffe uniforms . After attending Luftwaffe training schools , the fighter group was sent to the Eastern Front and designated as 15 . ( Kroatische ) Staffel ( squadron ) of III . Gruppe ( Group ) of Jagdgeschwader 52 ( 52nd Fighter Wing , or JG 52 ) . Meanwhile , Dukovac was transferred to the Luftwaffe Flugzeugführerschule A / B 120 ( pilot school 120 ) in Prenzlau , Germany in September or October . In April 1942 he underwent advanced training , and in June he was transferred to Jagdfliegerschule 4 ( fighter pilot school 4 ) at Fürth . In October 1942 , Leutnant Dubovac and seven other pilots joined 15 . / JG 52 , which was operating in the Caucasus flying Messerschmitt Bf 109G @-@ 2 fighters . On 29 October , Dubovac had his first 15 @-@ minute familiarisation flight , and by the afternoon of that day the new members of the unit were flying as wingmen to the veteran pilots of the Staffel .

= = = First victory = = =

On 11 November 1942 , Dukovac was flying his 12th mission , escorting Junkers Ju 87 Stuka dive bombers to Lazarevskoye . During the mission he and his companion were intercepted by Polikarpov I @-@ 16 Rata fighters , and Dubovac downed one of the attackers over the city of Tuapse to register his first confirmed aerial victory . Dukovac was unable to build upon his success at this time , as four days later the whole Staffel rotated back to the NDH because most of the personnel had endured a year of constant combat . The men of 15 . / JG 52 had a break of three months , commencing their return journey on 12 February 1943 , collecting their aircraft at Kraków in German @-@ occupied Poland on 18 February then flying to Lvov . They flew on to Nikolayev on 21 February . The Eastern Front had changed significantly during their absence , with the strategic initiative passing to the Soviets .

= = = Second tour = = =

On 30 March 1943 , 15 . / JG 52 transferred from Nikolayev to Kerch , and it flew the first missions of its second tour the following day . On 15 April , Dukovac and Feldwebel Viktor Mihel' took off on a patrol of the Krymskaja ? Abinskaja area , and Dukovac shot down a US @-@ made Bell P @-@ 39 Airacobra . Five days later , Dukovac was late taking off and was catching up to his Schwarm when he downed a LaGG @-@ 3 fighter during an engagement with four of the Soviet aircraft , but there were no witnesses to confirm his claim . Later that day , he and three other pilots were escorting a group of Ju 87s and Junkers Ju 88 medium bombers when they came across 25 Soviet fighters and flying boats over the Black Sea . Dukovac claimed another LaGG @-@ 3 , but again no @-@ one witnessed it . The following morning , Dukovac was on patrol with another pilot near Karbardinovka when they came across six Mikoyan @-@ Gurevich MiG @-@ 3 fighters . Dukovac claimed one , but the other pilot 's aircraft was hit and they had to retire . Later that day , Dukovac and another pilot engaged several LaGG @-@ 3s between Novorossiysk and Gelendzhik ; Dukovac claimed two , one of which was not witnessed . On 22 April , Dukovac was attacking shipping in Novorossiysk when he had to force @-@ land his aircraft with engine problems . He flew another mission in a different aircraft later that day over the Black Sea , downing a Ilyushin DB @-@ 3 bomber .

On 25 April , Dukovac and two others flew an escort mission for Henschel Hs 129 ground @-@ attack aircraft and Focke @-@ Wulf Fw 190 fighters attacking shipping near Primorsko @-@ Akhtarsk , during which the Croat pilots assisted in the sinking of two small vessels . On 27 April , Dukovac accounted for another LaGG @-@ 3 between Krymskaja and Abinskaja during a Heinkel He 111 escort . Dukovac claimed a victory over another LaGG @-@ 3 during a patrol three days later , but it was not seen by his wingman , as they had become separated during the fight . On 1 May Dukovac sank a small vessel . The following day , he and three other Croat pilots were escorting a group of He 111s when two LaGG @-@ 3s tried to intercept the formation . Dukovac and another pilot both claimed one of the Soviet fighters each , but their destruction was not witnessed . On 3 May , a morning mission saw Dukovac claim one of four LaGG @-@ 3s encountered near Krimskaja .

In the afternoon of 3 May , Dukovac and another pilot were escorting Hs 129s when they encountered a group of seven Ilyushin Il @-@ 2 ground attack aircraft and six fighters . During the engagement , Dukovac 's aircraft was damaged and he force @-@ landed , but not before claiming one of the Il @-@ 2s . The following morning , Dukovac and two others sortied on a He 111 escort mission , after which Dukovac again force @-@ landed , this time near Varenikovskaya . On 5 May , Dukovac made three claims : two LaGG @-@ 3s in the morning , and another during a Ju 87 escort mission in the evening . The following evening , Dukovac shot down another LaGG @-@ 3 while escorting Ju 87s . On 8 May , he claimed yet another LaGG @-@ 3 during an escort mission for a Fieseler Fi 156 Storch liaison aircraft . On 12 May , reinforcements arrived for 15 . / JG 52 , in the form of some of the pilots that had served on the first tour of the Eastern Front in 1942 , along with more former VVKJ pilots .

Dukovac did not meet further success until 25 May , when he claimed two Supermarine Spitfire V fighters southeast of Temryuk . Two days later , he and two other pilots surprised eight LaGG @-@

3s west of Trarehof , all of them claiming one , although Dukovac 's claim not witnessed . On 30 May , he was on another He 111 escort mission when he accounted for another LaGG @-@ 3 . At this juncture there were a spate of defections from 15 . / JG 52 , with pilots flying to Soviet airfields . The remaining pilots were questioned by the Luftwaffe , the Staffel was withdrawn from the front , and the commander of the HZL was replaced . This was the end of the second tour of 15 . / JG 52 on the Eastern Front , during which Dukovac had claimed 14 confirmed and six unconfirmed kills , five of which were later confirmed .

= = = Third tour = = =

The Luftwaffe decided to replace most of the remaining pilots of 15 . / JG 52 with newly trained men , and several veterans of the Staffel joined them during their fighter training at Fürth . Twelve graduated on 1 October 1943 , and under newly promoted Staffelfkapitan Oberleutnant Dukovac , they and another two pilots arrived at Nikolayev on 21 October , where they were equipped with eight Bf 109G4s and G @-@ 6s . They deployed to their airfield at Bagerovo and commenced combat missions on 26 October . Three days later , Dukovac scored the first victory of the tour by downing a LaGG @-@ 3 south of Kerch . Over the next two days he claimed an Il @-@ 2 and another LaGG @-@ 3 , then a Ju 87 . 1 November was the most successful day for 15 . / JG 52 for the entire war , with pilots claiming eleven aircraft with no loss , including two Il @-@ 2s for Dukovac . He claimed another two Il @-@ 2s the next day , but his aircraft was badly damaged by the escorting fighters and he crash @-@ landed near Mariental , escaping unhurt . He followed this up with a claim for a DB @-@ 3 on 6 November . On 15 November , the Staffel moved to Karankut , and four days later Dukovac downed yet another LaGG @-@ 3 . At the end of November , the approach of winter reduced flying operations almost to a halt , but Dukovac downed two Il @-@ 2s on 6 December near Bagerovo for his 30th and 31st confirmed aerial victories .

It was not until 12 January that Dukovac added to his tally , a Yakovlev Yak @-@ 1 . On 25 February , Dukovac flew five sorties . On the first he and his wingman downed a Yak @-@ 1 each , and on the second he shot down a Yak and a P @-@ 39 . During his fifth mission , he was shot down by P @-@ 39s and crash @-@ landed , injuring his spine . He was evacuated to a field hospital , but returned to 15 . / JG 52 as soon as he could walk , ten days later , only to find that he had just three pilots fit for duty . Despite the pending arrival of newly trained pilots , the loss of another two pilots by mid @-@ March led the Luftwaffe to decide that attempting to maintain 15 . / JG 52 was futile , and the men were sent home to the NDH . During its three tours , the Staffel had accounted for a total of 297 Soviet aircraft , of which Dukovac had 37 confirmed and eight unconfirmed aerial victories , seven of which were later confirmed . At the beginning of July , the Luftwaffe reconsidered its decision , and the newly promoted Hauptmann Dukovac and a group of veteran and fresh pilots began to make their way back to the Eastern Front . They were transported to Romania and then the Slovak Republic , but no aircraft were provided , and on 21 July the pilots were advised that the HZL was to be disbanded . Despite this , in August they were moved to an airfield in East Prussia , where they took delivery of ten Bf 109G @-@ 14s . At the beginning of September they flew to Lithuania in preparation to rejoin the fray .

= = = Defections = = =

On 20 September 1944 , Dukovac and another pilot defected to the Soviets after taking off from Labjau airfield . His defection was soon announced by the Red Army . This spelled the end of the Staffel , and the remaining members were withdrawn to East Prussia and retrained as infantry . These men were eventually released from infantry duties in early 1945 and were allowed to return to the NDH , where they were assigned to the ZNDH . In November 1944 , the Soviets handed Dukovac over to the Yugoslav Partisans , who offered him the position of flight instructor with the Yugoslav Air Force ( Serbo @-@ Croatian : Jugoslovensko ratno vazduhoplovstvo , JRV ) . The following month , Dukovac returned to Belgrade as a kapetan in the JRV , and after a conversion to fly Yakovlev fighters , he worked as a flight instructor in Pan?evo . By February 1945 , constant

provocations and insults directed at him by fellow JRV personnel owing to his service with the ZNDH prompted him to apply for a transfer . In April he was posted to the 1st Pilot Training School in Zadar as an instructor .

On 8 August , Dukovac commandeered a de Havilland Tiger Moth biplane , flew it across the Adriatic and defected again , this time to Italy . He was first placed in a refugee camp in Modena , and then one in Bagnoli del Trigno .

= = Later life and legacy = =

Dukovac began expressing increasingly anti @-@ Jewish beliefs following the war . He joined the Syrian Air Force in 1946 . During the 1948 Arab ? Israeli War , he was a captain in No. 1 Squadron of the Syrian Air Force , based in Estabal in Lebanon 's Beqaa Valley . He flew combat missions in an American T @-@ 6 Texan equipped with ground @-@ attack rockets and 110 @-@ pound ( 50 kg ) bombs .

Following the end of the Arab ? Israeli War , Dukovac emigrated to Canada . He settled in Toronto and started a family there . He worked for IBM and was a co @-@ founder of one of the largest Croatian émigré organisations in Canada , the United Croats of Canada . He died in Toronto in September 1990 .

Dukovac was the top @-@ scoring Croatian pilot of World War II . During his life , there was much controversy surrounding the exact number of aircraft that he had downed . Croatian wartime documents discovered in the Military History Institute in Belgrade after his death show that the ZNDH credited him with 44 confirmed kills . At least one other source indicates a tally of 40 confirmed kills with five unconfirmed . The ZNDH total of 44 included 18 LaGG @-@ 3s , 12 Ilyushin Il @-@ 2s , three P @-@ 39s , two DB @-@ 3s , two Yak @-@ 1s , and one each of the following aircraft ; Il @-@ 16 , MiG @-@ 3 , Spitfire , La @-@ 5 , Yak @-@ 9 , Pe @-@ 2 , and A @-@ 20 . The ZNDH records also noted one unconfirmed claim .