

= Hans @-@ Ulrich Rudel =

Hans @-@ Ulrich Rudel (2 July 1916 ? 18 December 1982) was a Luftwaffe military aviator during World War II , a ground @-@ attack pilot credited with the destruction of 519 tanks , as well as a number of ships . He also claimed 9 aerial victories , and the destruction of more than 800 vehicles of all types , over 150 artillery , anti @-@ tank and anti @-@ aircraft positions , 4 armored trains , and numerous bridges and supply lines . He flew 2 @,@ 530 ground @-@ attack missions exclusively on the Eastern Front , usually flying the Junkers Ju 87 " Stuka " dive bomber , and 430 missions flying the Focke @-@ Wulf Fw 190 .

Born in the Province of Silesia , Rudel volunteered for military service in the Luftwaffe in 1936 . Following flight training , he served in an aerial reconnaissance unit at the outbreak of World War II in Europe . He transferred to the dive bomber force , and was posted to France . Rudel flew his first combat missions as a dive bomber pilot at the beginning of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 . On 23 September 1941 , he was credited with severely damaging the Soviet battleship Marat , which effectively put her out of action for several months . He was posted to the Luftwaffe main testing ground at Rechlin , and experimented with the Bordkanone BK 3 @,@ 7 equipped Ju 87 G in the anti @-@ tank role . Back on the Eastern Front , Rudel flew a Ju 87 G in combat over the Kuban bridgehead , destroying numerous landing craft . He destroyed his 100th tank on 30 October 1943 and on 22 February 1944 was appointed Gruppenkommandeur (group commander) of III . Gruppe of Schlachtgeschwader 2 " Immelmann " (SG 2 ? 2nd Ground Support Wing) .

By 29 March 1944 , Rudel was credited with over 200 tanks destroyed , and more than 1 @,@ 800 combat missions logged . He was placed in command of SG 2 " Immelmann " in October 1944 . Rudel flew his 2,400th combat mission on 22 December 1944 , and on the following day destroyed his 463rd tank . For these achievements , he was awarded the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Golden Oak Leaves , Swords , and Diamonds , presented to him by Adolf Hitler on 1 January 1945 . Rudel was severely injured in combat on 8 February 1945 , requiring the amputation of his right lower leg , and time in the hospital . On 25 March 1945 , Rudel began flying again , before surrendering to US forces at the Kitzingen Airfield on 8 May 1945 .

After his release from captivity in April 1946 , Rudel owned and operated a haulage company in Coesfeld . In 1948 , he emigrated to Argentina and founded the " Kameradenwerk " , a relief organization for Nazi war criminals that helped fugitive Nazis escape to Latin America or the Middle East . Together with Willem Sassen , he helped conceal and protect Josef Mengele , a former SS doctor in the Auschwitz concentration camp , responsible for the selection of victims to be killed in the gas chambers . He also worked in the arms industry and as a military advisor . Through Juan Perón , the President of Argentina , he secured financially lucrative government military contracts . He was also active as a military adviser and arms dealer for the regime in Bolivia , for Augusto Pinochet in Chile , and for Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay . Due to these activities , he was placed under observation by the US Central Intelligence Agency .

In the West German federal election of 1953 , Rudel , who had returned to West Germany , was the top candidate for the far @-@ right Deutsche Reichspartei (German Reich Party) , but was not elected to the Bundestag . Following the Revolución Libertadora in 1955 , the uprising that ended the second presidential term of Perón , Rudel was forced to move to Paraguay , where he frequently acted as a foreign representative for several German companies doing business in South America . In 1977 , he became a spokesman for the Deutsche Volksunion (German People 's Union) , a nationalist political party founded by Gerhard Frey . Rudel died in Rosenheim in 1982 , and was buried in Dornhausen .

= = Early life and career = =

Rudel was born on 2 July 1916 in Konradswaldau , Silesia , a province in the Kingdom of Prussia (present @-@ day Grz?dy) in the administrative district of Gmina Czarny Bór , within Wa?brzych County , Lower Silesian Voivodeship , in Poland . He was the third child of Lutheran minister Johannes Rudel and his wife Martha , née Mückner . He had two older sisters , Ingeborg and

Johanna . The children were raised in a number of different parishes , which included Schweidnitz (present @-@ day ?widnica) , Sagan (present @-@ day ?aga?) , Niesky , Görlitz and Lauban (present @-@ day Luba?) . As a boy , Rudel was a poor scholar , but a very keen sportsman . From 1922 to 1936 , he attended the Volksschule , a primary school , and the humanities oriented Gymnasium , a secondary school , in Lauban , and graduated with his Abitur (university @-@ preparatory high school diploma) . In late 1936 , he attended the compulsory Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labor Service) at Muskau , working on the banks of the Lusatian Neisse .

On 4 December 1936 , Rudel joined the Luftwaffe as a Fahnenjunker (officer cadet) . Following basic training , his flight training began in June 1937 at the Luftkriegsschule 3 (3rd Air Warfare School) at Wildpark @-@ Werder near Berlin . In June 1938 , now an Oberfähnrich (officer candidate) , he joined I. Gruppe (1st group) of Sturzkampfgeschwader 168 (StG 168 ? 168th Dive Bomber Wing) at Graz @-@ Thalerhof , present @-@ day Graz Airport . There , he was assigned to the 1 . Staffel (1st squadron) for dive bombing training . Rudel , as a teetotaler and non @-@ smoker , was not well accepted among his peers . He also had difficulties learning the new techniques , and was considered unsuitable for combat flying , so on 1 December 1938 , he was transferred to the Aufklärungsschule (Reconnaissance Flying School) at Hildesheim for air observer training in operational aerial reconnaissance . He was promoted to Leutnant (second lieutenant) on 1 January 1939 . In June 1939 , he was posted to the 2 . Staffel (2nd squadron) of Fernaufklärungsgruppe 121 (121st Long @-@ Range Reconnaissance Group) at Prenzlau .

= = World War II = =

On Friday 1 September 1939 , German forces invaded Poland starting World War II in Europe . Shortly before the invasion , Aufklärungsgruppe 121 was moved to Schneidemühl , present @-@ day Pi?a , at the time close to the Polish Corridor . As an air observer , Rudel flew on long @-@ range reconnaissance missions over Poland . He flew several missions over the Brest @-@ Litovsk ? Kovel ? Lutsk railway line , and earned the Iron Cross 2nd Class (Eisernes Kreuz zweiter Klasse) on 10 November 1939 . Following the invasion , Rudel submitted several requests for transfer back to the dive bomber force . On 2 March 1940 , he was posted to Fliegerausbildungs @-@ Regiment 43 (43rd Aviators Training Regiment) , based at Vienna @-@ Stammersdorf and later at Crailsheim . There he served as a regimental adjutant . During his time with Fliegerausbildungs @-@ Regiment 43 , Rudel participated in various sporting events , including a cross Vienna relay race , and on 6 October 1940 , he took third place in the Silesian decathlon championship . In late June 1940 , he was transferred to I. Gruppe of Sturzkampfgeschwader 3 (StG 3 ? 3rd Dive Bomber Wing) , formerly his old unit I. Gruppe of StG 168 , which had been renamed , and was based at Caen , France .

Rudel did not fly operationally during the Battle of Britain , since he was still regarded a poor pilot . Serving in a non @-@ combatant role , he was promoted to Oberleutnant (first lieutenant) on 1 September 1940 . In early 1941 , he was transferred to the Stuka @-@ Ergänzungsstaffel (Supplementary Dive Bomber Squadron) at Graz @-@ Thalerhof , a specialized training unit for new dive bomber pilots . There , according to his own account , he finally learned to master the Junkers Ju 87 two @-@ man dive bomber . In mid @-@ April 1941 , he was assigned to I. Gruppe of Sturzkampfgeschwader 2 " Immelmann " (StG 2 ? 2nd Dive Bomber Wing) , named after the World War I fighter ace Max Immelmann , and based at Molaoi , Greece . His poor reputation as a pilot preceded him , and he spent the Battle of Crete in a non @-@ combat role . At the time , the Geschwader was commanded by Geschwaderkommodore (wing commander) Major Oskar Dinort , and Rudel 's I. Gruppe was headed by Gruppenkommandeur (group commander) Hauptmann (captain) Hubertus Hitschhold .

= = = War against the Soviet Union = = =

In June 1941 , StG 2 " Immelmann " was moved to Raczki in preparation for Operation Barbarossa , the invasion of the Soviet Union . Initially for this campaign , the Geschwaderstab (headquarters

unit) , I. and III . Gruppe of StG 2 " Immelmann " had been placed under the control of VIII . Fliegerkorps (8th Air Corps) , led by General der Flieger (General of the Aviators) Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen , subordinated to Luftflotte 2 (2nd Air Fleet) under the command of Generalfeldmarschall (Field Marshal) Albert Kesselring , and supported the northern or left flank of Army Group Center . The main objective of this army group , under the command of Feldmarschall Fedor von Bock , was to capture the capital of the Soviet Union , Moscow .

Rudel , who had been ordered to shuttle a Ju 87 to the production facility at Cottbus for a maintenance overhaul of the aircraft , heard over the radio news of the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 . That day , he flew another aircraft to Insterburg , present @-@ day Tschernjachowsk , and then southeast to Raczki . There , he was assigned to 1 . Staffel commanded by Oberleutnant Ewald Janssen . As Janssen 's wingman , Rudel flew his first four combat missions as a dive bomber pilot against Soviet tank and troop deployments in the vicinity of Grodno and Vawkavysk on 23 June 1941 . During the first two weeks of the campaign , StG 2 " Immelmann " flew ground support missions for armored units of Panzergruppe 3 (3rd Panzer Group) advancing towards Smolensk . He was then transferred to the III . Gruppe of StG 2 " Immelmann " , under command of Hauptmann Heinrich Brücker , and appointed Technischer Offizier (TO ? Technical Officer) , a role in which he was responsible for the supervision of all technical aspects , such as routine maintenance , servicing , and modifications of the Gruppe . On 18 July 1941 , he was awarded the Iron Cross 1st Class (Eisernes Kreuz erster Klasse) and the Front Flying Clasp of the Luftwaffe for Ground Attack Fighters in Gold (Frontflugschleife für Schlachtfieger in Gold) .

By August 1941 , Adolf Hitler had shifted VIII . Fliegerkorps northwards in support of Army Group North , under command of Feldmarschall Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb , in its attempt to capture Leningrad , present @-@ day Saint Petersburg . As a consequence of this decision , on 29 August 1941 , III . Gruppe was ordered to an airfield south of Luga . There , Rudel flew numerous combat missions in support of the 16th Army and 18th Army advancing northwards . The Soviet Navy Baltic Fleet , with its capital ships Marat and Oktyabrskaya Revolutsiya , supported by the heavy cruisers Kirov and Maxim Gorky , bombarded German forces on their advance towards Leningrad . Subsequently , Richthofen ordered StG 2 " Immelmann " to attack this Soviet naval task force . On 21 September 1941 , Rudel flew his first mission against this task force , claiming a hit on the Marat with a 500 kg (1 @,@ 100 lb) bomb . On 23 September , StG 2 " Immelmann " , now armed with 1 @,@ 000 kg (2 @,@ 200 lb) armor @-@ piercing bombs , again attacked the Soviet ships based at Kronstadt harbor . Oberleutnant Lothar Lau scored a hit on Marat , causing a fire . Rudel also hit Marat , causing an enormous explosion that put her out of action for several months . That day , III . Gruppe flew a second mission against the Soviet fleet at Kronstadt . Rudel did not participate in this mission . An accident while taxiing had rendered the aircraft of III . Gruppe commander , Hauptmann Ernst @-@ Siegfried Steen , unserviceable , and Steen ordered Rudel to hand over his Ju 87 to him . Steen , with Unteroffizier Alfred Scharnowski , Rudel 's regular air gunner , led the Gruppe in this attack . Flying into intense anti @-@ aircraft fire over Kronstadt , Steen and Scharnowski took a direct hit while attacking Kirov , and both were killed in action . In October 1941 , Erwin Hentschel joined Rudel as his new radio operator and air gunner .

Army Group Center opened Operation Taifun , the Battle of Moscow , on 30 September 1941 and VIII . Fliegerkorps was again placed under the command of Luftflotte 2 . On 20 October 1941 , Rudel was awarded the Honor Goblet of the Luftwaffe (Ehrenpokal der Luftwaffe) , and on 2 December 1941 , the German Cross in Gold (Deutsches Kreuz in Gold) , the first pilot of III . Gruppe to receive this distinction . By the end of December , he had flown his 400th mission , and on 6 January 1942 received the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes) . The presentation was made by Richthofen on 15 January . Rudel had been nominated for the Knight 's Cross for severely damaging the battleships Marat and Oktyabrskaya Revolutsiya , sinking one heavy cruiser , and rendering another one unserviceable . In actions against land targets , he was credited with damaging or destroying 15 bridges , 23 artillery positions , 4 armored trains , and 17 tanks or assault guns . In the winter of 1941 ? 42 , Rudel fought in the combat zones of the Volga ? Daugave ? Dnieper rivers near the Valdai Hills , in the vicinity of the Kholm and Demyansk Pockets , both pockets resulting from the German retreat following their defeat during the

Battle of Moscow , in the area west of Rzhev , and over the railway line at Sychyovka .

In early 1942 , Rudel was granted home leave . During his vacation , he stayed with his parents in Alt @-@ Kohlfurt , present @-@ day Stary W?gliniec , and got married . He and his wife then took a skiing vacation in Tirol , Austria . From March to August 1942 , Rudel was appointed leader of the Ergänzungsstaffel at Graz @-@ Thalerhof , and transferred with this Staffel to Sarabus , present @-@ day Hwardijske , located 10 kilometers (6 @-@ 2 miles) north of Simferopol on the Crimean peninsula . Beginning on 15 August 1942 , flying with the Stuka @-@ Ergänzungsstaffel and as Staffelkapitän (squadron leader) of 9 . Staffel (9th squadron) of StG 2 " Immelmann " , Rudel flew missions in the Caucasus and over the Black Sea . On 23 September 1942 , he damaged a 4 @-@ 000 gross register tons (GRT) merchant ship in the harbor of Tuapse , and flew his 500th combat mission the following day . In early November 1942 , Rudel was briefly hospitalized in Rostov @-@ on @-@ Don and treated for hepatitis . On 17 November 1942 , Rudel was appointed Staffelkapitän of the 1 . Staffel (1st squadron) of StG 2 " Immelmann " , and flew with this unit in the Battle of Stalingrad . Besides StG 2 " Immelmann " , Richthofen had ordered the Stukas of II . Gruppe of Sturzkampfgeschwader 1 (StG 1 ? 1st Dive Bomber Wing) and elements of Sturzkampfgeschwader 77 (StG 77 ? 77th Dive Bomber Wing) to break Soviet opposition from the air . On 25 November 1942 , I. Gruppe of StG 2 " Immelmann " defended an airfield occupied by StG 1 at Oblivskaya against attacks from an Soviet cavalry division . That day , Rudel flew 17 combat missions in its defense . Following his 750th combat mission , he was nominated for ? but not awarded ? the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes mit Eichenlaub) on 14 December 1942 .

= = = Anti @-@ tank operations = = =

On 10 February 1943 , Rudel flew his 1,000th combat mission from Gorlovka against forces of the 57th Army in the vicinity of Izium . He was then sent on fourteen days home leave , which he spent at St. Anton , skiing on the Arlberg .

Following this vacation , he was ordered to the Luftwaffe main testing ground at Rechlin . There , under the command of Hauptmann Hans @-@ Karl Stepp , the Luftwaffe was experimenting with using the Ju 87 G in the anti @-@ tank role , armed with two 37 @-@ millimeter (1 @-@ 5 @-@ inch) Bordkanone BK 3 @-@ 7 under @-@ wing autocannons . On 1 April 1943 , he was promoted to Hauptmann with a rank age backdated to 1 April 1942 . The anti @-@ tank unit Versuchskommando zur Panzerbekämpfung was later located at Bryansk @-@ Desna , and then at an airfield at Kerch on the Kerch Peninsula . The airfield was also used by StG 2 " Immelmann " , which at the time was flying missions against the Kuban bridgehead near Krymsk . There , flying along with StG 2 " Immelmann " , Rudel was credited with the destruction of 70 Soviet landing crafts , flying the cannon equipped Ju 87 . Some of these attacks were filmed by an onboard gun camera and shown in Die Deutsche Wochenschau , a newsreel released in German cinemas , its production supervised and censored by the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda under Joseph Goebbels . Der Adler , a biweekly Nazi propaganda magazine published by the Luftwaffe , also reported his actions in volume 12 of 1943 . On 14 April 1943 , Rudel was awarded the Oak Leaves to his Knight 's Cross for his achievements in over 1 @-@ 000 combat missions . He was the 229th member of the German armed forces to be so honored . Rudel received the Oak Leaves from Hitler personally at his office in the New Reich Chancellery in Berlin .

On 5 July 1943 , the first day of the Battle of Kursk , Rudel flew his first combat missions with the cannon equipped Ju 87 G against Soviet tanks in the area of Belgorod , destroying four T @-@ 34s on the first mission . In total , he was credited with twelve tanks destroyed that day . The same day , Rudel and his squadron flew in support of 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich and its advance towards Teterevino . At 10 : 30 , a group of about 30 T @-@ 34s from the 5th Guards Tank Corps , possibly belonging to the 22nd Guards Tank Brigade , attacked SS @-@ Obersturmbannführer Hans Albin Freiherr von Reitzenstein 's Panzers . In two days , 5th Guards Tank Corps lost approximately 100 of its 200 tanks to Rudel 's Stukas and SS Panzers . On 17 July 1943 , Hauptmann Walter Krauß , Gruppenkommandeur of III . Gruppe , was killed in action near Oryol .

Two days later , Rudel was appointed leader of III . Gruppe . On the morning of 12 August 1943 , Rudel and Hentschel respectively completed their 1,300th and 1,000th combat mission . Hentschel was the first air gunner to achieve this mark .

On the morning of 9 October 1943 , Rudel and Hentschel respectively completed their 1,500th and 1,200th combat mission . Rudel was the first pilot to achieve this mark . The event was celebrated at an airfield at Kostromka , south of Kryvyi Rih , and was attended by General der Flieger Kurt Pflugbeil , commanding general of the IV . Fliegerkorps (4th Air Corps) . StG 2 " Immelmann " was redesignated to Schlachtgeschwader 2 " Immelmann " (SG 2 ? 2nd Ground Support Wing) on 18 October 1943 . On 30 October 1943 , Rudel , flying the Ju 87 G near Kirovohrad , was credited with the destruction of his 100th tank . He flew his 1,600th mission in November 1943 , and was credited with seven tanks destroyed on 23 November 1943 . For this achievement , on 25 November , he was awarded the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes mit Eichenlaub und Schwertern) , the 42nd member of the German armed forces to be so honored . On that day , Hentschel was awarded the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross . The presentation to Rudel and Hentschel was made by Hitler at the Führer Headquarter Wolfsschanze (Wolf 's Lair) in Rastenburg , now K?trzyn in Poland . At Rastenburg that day , Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant Colonel) Dietrich Hrabak , Geschwaderkommodore of Jagdgeschwader 52 (JG 52 ? 52nd Fighter Wing) , was also present at the award ceremony , and received the Oak Leaves to his Knight 's Cross .

= = = Defeat on the Eastern Front = = =

In January 1944 , Rudel led III . Gruppe in defensive support of the 8th Army . During the Kirovohrad Offensive (1 ? 16 January 1944) , the 2nd Ukrainian Front , under command of Ivan Konev , attacked the German 8th Army . The Soviet operation was successful and led to German forces being encircled in the Battle of the Korsun ? Cherkassy Pocket (24 January ? 16 February 1944) . From 7 to 10 January 1944 , Rudel was credited with the destruction of 17 Soviet tanks in these battles ; he claimed his 150th tank victory on 11 January 1944 , and flew his 1 @, @ 700 mission on 16 January 1944 . He was officially appointed Gruppenkommandeur of III . Gruppe on 22 February 1944 , and promoted to Major on 1 March 1944 , with his seniority back dated to 1 October 1942 . On 20 March , Rudel landed behind Soviet lines to save a downed crew from captivity . This was his eighth mission of the day ; the target area had been a bridge spanning the Dniester near Yampil . Unable to take off as the wheels of his aircraft had sunk into the soft ground , the four headed back to German held territory on foot . Pursued by Soviet troops , the men attempted to swim across the Dniester River . Rudel and two of the others made it across , while the fourth , Hentschel , drowned in the attempt . Soon afterwards , the three were captured . Rudel was wounded by small arms fire in the shoulder as he made his escape and returned to German held territory the following day . Upon his return , Ernst Gadermann , previously the troop doctor of III . Gruppe , joined Rudel as his new radio operator and air gunner .

Rudel completed his 1 @, @ 800 combat mission on 25 March 1944 . The next day he flew several more sorties during the prelude of the First Jassy ? Kishinev Offensive (8 April ? 6 June 1944) , and was credited with the destruction of 17 tanks at F?le?ti , 40 kilometers (25 mi) north of Ia?i . This achievement was mentioned in the Wehrmachtbericht , a propaganda radio report , the first of five such mentions , on 27 March 1944 . The next day , Rudel was again mentioned in the Wehrmachtbericht , which reported his 202nd tank kill . For this he was awarded the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves , Swords and Diamonds (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes mit Eichenlaub , Schwertern und Brillanten) on 29 March 1944 . Rudel was the tenth member of the Wehrmacht , and the seventh pilot , who had received this award . The presentation was made at the Berghof , Hitler 's home in the Obersalzberg of the Bavarian Alps near Berchtesgaden . Following the presentation , Rudel went on vacation , and stayed with his wife and son at Alt @- @ Kohlfurt . He then returned to the Eastern Front , flying to join his Gruppe , which was based at Hu?i , southeast of Ia?i . Rudel flew his 2,000th combat mission on 1 June 1944 , destroying his 301st tank that day , 78 of which had been destroyed with bombs and 223 with the 37 mm cannon . This

event earned him his third mention in the Wehrmachtbericht , which was broadcast on 3 June 1944 . The Commander @-@ in @-@ Chief of the Luftwaffe , Reichsmarschall (Marshal of the Reich) Hermann Göring , presented Rudel with the Combined Pilots @-@ Observation Badge in Gold with Diamonds (Flugzeugführer- und Beobachterabzeichen in Gold mit Brillanten) , and the Golden Front Flying Clasp of the Luftwaffe for Ground Attack Fighters with Pennant " 2 @,@ 000 " (Frontflugschleife für Schlachtfieger in Gold mit Anhänger " 2 @,@ 000 ") .

On 13 July 1944 , III . Gruppe was transferred from Hu?i , Romania to the central sector of the Eastern Front , where the Red Army was attacking towards the Vistula in Operation Bagration . Flying from an airfield at Che?m , the Gruppe targeted Rava @-@ Ruska and other targets in the Ukraine and Belarus area . On 22 July , the Gruppe moved to Mielec in the Vistula @-@ San triangle ; from Mielec missions against armored columns at Jaros?aw , Rzeszów , and the Wis?ok were flown . On 5 August 1944 , Rudel claimed 11 tanks destroyed , earning him his fourth mention in the Wehrmachtbericht . Rudel 's number of tank kills had now reached 378 , including 300 destroyed with the 37 mm cannon . Fighting on the Courland front , he was credited with 8 tank kills on 14 August 1944 , taking the total to 320 tank kills with the 37 mm cannon . On 19 August , Rudel 's aircraft was hit by anti @-@ aircraft fire in the vicinity of ?rg?i , Latvia . In the resulting forced landing , both he and Gademmann were injured , Rudel in the leg , and Gademmann suffering several broken ribs . Rudel 's unit was then ordered to transfer back to Romania , and then to Hungary . From 28 August onwards , Rudel operated from airfields at Buz?u , 70 kilometers (43 mi) northeast of the vital oil refineries at Ploie?ti , namely T??nad near Tokaj , Miskolc , Sajókaza northeast of Lake Balaton , Farnos near Szolnok , Vecsés near Budapest , and Börgönd near Székesfehérvár .

= = = Wing Commander = = =

Rudel was promoted to Oberstleutnant on 1 September 1944 , and appointed leader of SG 2 " Immelmann " , replacing Stepp , on 1 October 1944 . He handed over command of his III . Gruppe to Hauptmann Kurt Lau . On 17 November 1944 , he was wounded in the thigh , and had to make an emergency landing at a fighter airfield near Budapest . Following his release from the hospital , he flew subsequent missions with his leg in a plaster cast .

On 22 December 1944 , Rudel completed his 2,400th combat mission , and the next day , he reported his 463rd tank destroyed . On 29 December 1944 , Rudel was promoted to Oberst (colonel) , and was awarded the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Golden Oak Leaves , Swords , and Diamonds (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes mit Goldenem Eichenlaub , Schwertern und Brillanten) , the first and only person to receive this distinction . This award was presented to him by Hitler at the Adlerhorst , Hitler 's headquarters in the Taunus mountains during the Battle of the Bulge , on 1 January 1945 . On 14 January 1945 , Rudel received the Hungarian Golden Medal for Bravery (Vitézségi Érem Arany) , which was presented to him by Hungary 's Head of State Ferenc Szálasi at Sopron , Hungary .

On 8 February 1945 , Rudel was credited with the destruction of 13 tanks near Lebus on the Oder River , earning him his fifth mention in the Wehrmachtbericht on 10 February 1945 . During the attack on the 13th tank , a 40 mm (1 @.@ 6 in) shell hit his aircraft . He was badly wounded in the right foot , and crash landed inside German lines . His observer / gunner Gademmann stemmed the bleeding . Rudel was taken to a field hospital of the Waffen @-@ SS at Seelow , where his leg had to be amputated below the knee . He was then hospitalized in the Zoo flak tower in Berlin , and was flying operationally again with a modified rudder pedal on 25 March 1945 . He claimed 26 more tanks destroyed by the end of the war . On 19 April 1945 , the day before Hitler 's final birthday , Rudel spent the evening talking to Hitler in the Führerbunker , an air @-@ raid shelter located near the Reich Chancellery in Berlin . According to John Toland , author of the book Adolf Hitler , who based his statement on Rudel 's book Stuka Pilot and personal interviews with Rudel , Hitler had ordered him to take charge of all jet fighter aircraft . Rudel refused , as he preferred flying to a desk job . By the time Rudel left , it was after midnight .

On 8 May 1945 , determined not to fall into Soviet hands , he left his ground personnel behind and led three Ju 87s and four Fw 190s westward from an airfield at Klecany , north of Prague , landing at

Kitzingen airfield , which was held by the United States Army Air Forces 405th Fighter Group . Rudel had his men lock the brakes and collapse the landing gear to render the aircraft useless ; all but one obeyed his order and wiped off their undercarriage . There he surrendered to US forces , and was taken prisoner of war . Over the next eleven months , he was held captive in Erlangen and Wiesbaden , then in prison camps in England and France , before he was taken to Fürth in Bavaria .

= = Later life = =

In April 1946 , Rudel was released from captivity at Fürth . While Rudel was interned , his family fleeing from the advancing Red Army had found refuge with Gadermann 's parents in Wuppertal . There , Gadermann helped Rudel look for work . He was offered an office job , but he did not accept the position . He then owned and operated a haulage company in Coesfeld . In 1948 , he emigrated to Argentina via the ratlines , travelling via the Austrian Zillertal to Italy . In Rome , with the help of South Tyrolean smugglers , and aided by the Austrian titular bishop Alois Hudal , he bought himself a fake Red Cross passport with the cover name " Emilio Meier " , and took a flight from Rome to Buenos Aires , where he arrived on 8 June 1948 .

= = = In South America = = =

After Rudel moved to Argentina , he became a close friend and confidant of the President of Argentina Juan Perón , and Paraguay 's dictator and Nazi Germany admirer Alfredo Stroessner . In Argentina , he founded the " Kameradenwerk " (lit . " comrades work " or " comrades act ") , a relief organization for Nazi war criminals . Prominent members of the " Kameradenwerk " included SS officer Ludwig Lienhardt , whose extradition from Sweden had been demanded by the Soviet Union on war crime charges , Kurt Christmann , a member of the Gestapo sentenced to 10 years for war crimes committed at Krasnodar , Austrian war criminal Fridolin Guth , and the German spy in Chile , August Siebrecht . The group maintained close contact with other internationally wanted fascists , such as Ante Pavelić , Carlo Scorza , Vittorio Mussolini , the son of Benito Mussolini , and Konstantin von Neurath . In addition to these war criminals that fled to Argentina , the " Kameradenwerk " also assisted Nazi criminals imprisoned in Europe , including Rudolf Hess and Karl Dönitz , with food parcels from Argentina and sometimes by paying their legal fees . In Argentina , Rudel became acquainted with notorious Nazi concentration camp doctor and war criminal Josef Mengele . Rudel , together with Willem Sassen , a former member of the Waffen SS and a Wehrmacht propaganda and war correspondent unit , who initially worked as Rudel 's driver and later for the Dürer Verlag , helped to relocate Mengele to Brazil by introducing him to Nazi supporter Wolfgang Gerhard . In 1957 , Rudel and Mengele together travelled to Chile to meet with Walter Rauff , the inventor of the mobile gas chamber .

In Argentina , Rudel lived in Villa Carlos Paz , roughly 36 kilometers (22 mi) from the populous Córdoba City , where he rented a house and operated a brickworks . There , Rudel wrote his wartime memoirs *Trotzdem* ([Nevertheless] or [In Spite of Everything]) . The book was published in November 1949 by the Dürer Verlag in Buenos Aires . Discussion ensued in Germany on Rudel being allowed to publish the book , because he was a known Nazi . In the book , he supported Nazi policies . This book was later re-edited and published in the United States , as the Cold War intensified , under the title , *Stuka Pilot* , which supported the German invasion of the Soviet Union . Pierre Clostermann , a French fighter pilot , had befriended Rudel and wrote the foreword to the French edition of his book *Stuka Pilot* . In 1951 , he published a pamphlet *Dolchstoß oder Legende ?* ([Backstab or Legend ?] or [Daggerthrust or Legend ?]) , in which he claimed that " Germany 's war against Bolshevism was a defensive war " , moreover , " a crusade for the whole world " . In the 1950s , Rudel became friends with Savitri Devi , a writer and proponent of Hinduism and Nazism and introduced her to a number of Nazi fugitives in Spain and the Middle East .

With the help of Perón , Rudel secured financially lucrative governmental military contracts . He was

also active as a military adviser and arms dealer for the regime and " Cocaine Generals " in Bolivia , for Augusto Pinochet in Chile and Stroessner in Paraguay . In addition , he was in contact with Werner Naumann , formerly a State Secretary in Goebbels ' Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in Nazi Germany . Following the Revolución Libertadora in 1955 , a military and civilian uprising that ended the second presidential term of Perón , Rudel was forced to leave Argentina and move to Paraguay . During the following years in South America , Rudel frequently acted as a foreign representative for several German companies , including Salzgitter AG , Dornier Flugzeugwerke , Focke @-@ Wulf , Messerschmitt , Siemens and Lahmeyer International , a German consulting engineering firm . Rudel 's input was used during the development of the A @-@ 10 Thunderbolt II , a United States Air Force aircraft designed solely for close air support , including attacking tanks , armored vehicles and other ground targets .

According to the historian Peter Hammerschmidt , based on files of the German Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND ? Federal Intelligence Service) and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) , his research revealed that the BND , via the cover @-@ up company " Merex " , was in close contact with former members of the SS and the Nazi Party . In 1966 , Merex , represented by Walter Drück , formerly a Generalmajor in the Wehrmacht and then an agent of the BND and under observation of the CIA , via contacts established by Rudel and Sassen , sold discarded equipment of the Bundeswehr (Federal Defence) to various dictators in Latin America . According to Hammerschmidt , Rudel assisted in establishing contact between Merex and Friedrich Schwend , a former member of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Main Security Office) and involved in Operation Bernhard . Schwend , according to Hammerschmidt , had close links with the military services of Peru and Bolivia . In the early sixties , Rudel , Schwend and Klaus Barbie , founded a company called " La Estrella " , the star . This company employed a number of former SS officers , who , after the war , had found refuge in Latin America . Rudel , through his involvement in La Estrella , was also in contact with Otto Skorzeny , who had his own network of former SS and Wehrmacht officers .

= = = Sport and political ambitions = = =

Although missing one leg , he remained an active sportsman , playing tennis , skiing , and mountain climbing . In 1949 , he competed in an international skiing competition held at Bariloche . In this competition , Rudel took fourth place in the men 's slalom , first place went to Stein Eriksen . In 1951 , he climbed the highest peak in the Americas , Aconcagua , at 6 @,@ 960 @.@ 8 meters (22 @,@ 837 ft) , and by extension the highest point in both the Western Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere . Due to deteriorating weather conditions , Rudel had to turn back short of the summit on 31 December 1951 . In 1953 , Rudel ascended the Llullay @-@ Yacu in the Argentine Andes , at 6 @,@ 739 meters (22 @,@ 110 feet) the fifth highest volcano , three times . On his second expedition , the team photographer Erwin Neubart was killed in a fall . His body was recovered and buried on the third expedition . Rudel suffered a stroke on 26 April 1970 .

Rudel returned to West Germany in 1953 and became a leading member of the Neo @-@ Nazi nationalist political party , the German Reich Party (DRP ? Deutsche Reichspartei) . In the West German federal election of 1953 , Rudel was the top candidate for the DRP , but was not elected to the Bundestag . According to Josef Müller @-@ Marein , journalist and editor @-@ in @-@ chief of Die Zeit , Rudel had an egocentric character . In his political speeches , Rudel made generalizing statements , claiming that he was speaking on behalf of most , if not all , former German soldiers of World War II . Rudel heavily criticized the Western Allies during World War II for not having supported Germany in its war against the Soviet Union . Rudel 's political demeanor subsequently alienated him from his formers comrades , foremost Gademmann . Müller @-@ Marein concluded his article with the statement : " Rudel no longer has a Geschwader ! " In 1977 , he became a spokesman for the Deutsche Volksunion (German People 's Union) , a nationalist political party founded by Gerhard Frey . In 2004 , Frey and Hajo Herrmann published an abstract of Rudel 's biography in the book Helden der Wehrmacht ? Unsterbliche deutsche Soldaten [Heroes of the Wehrmacht ? Immortal German soldiers] . This publication was classified as a far @-@ right wing

publication by the German scholars Claudia Fröhlich and Horst @-@ Alfred Heinrich .

= = = Public scandals = = =

In October 1976 , Rudel inadvertently triggered a chain of events , which were later dubbed the Rudel @-@ Affäre (Rudel Scandal) . Aufklärungsgeschwader 51 (51st Reconnaissance Wing) the latest unit to hold the name " Immelmann " , held a reunion for members of the unit including those from World War II . The Secretary of State in the Federal Ministry of Defence , Hermann Schmidt authorized the event . Fearing that Rudel would spread Nazi propaganda on the German Air Force airbase in Bremgarten near Freiburg , Schmidt ordered that the meeting could not be held at the airbase . News of this decision reached Generalleutnant Walter Krupinski , at the time commanding general of NATO 's Second Allied Tactical Air Force , and a former World War II fighter pilot . Krupinski reached out to Gerhard Limberg , Inspector of the Air Force , requesting that the meeting be allowed to be held at the airbase . Limberg later confirmed Krupinski 's request , and the meeting was held on Bundeswehr premises , a decision which Schmidt still did not agree to . Rudel attended the meeting , where besides signing his book and a few autographs , he refrained from making any political statements .

During a routine press event , journalists , who had been briefed by Schmidt , questioned Krupinski and his deputy Karl Heinz Franke about Rudel . In this interview , the generals compared Rudel 's past as a Nazi and Neo @-@ Nazi supporter to the career of prominent Social Democrat leader Herbert Wehner , who had been a member of the German Communist Party in the 1930s , and who had lived in Moscow during World War II , where he was allegedly involved in NKVD operations . Calling Wehner an extremist , they described Rudel as an honorable man , who " hadn 't stolen the family silver or anything else " . When these remarks became public , the Federal Minister of Defense Georg Leber , complying with § 50 of the Soldatengesetz (military law) , ordered the generals into early retirement as of 1 November 1976 . Leber , however , a member of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) , was heavily criticized for his actions by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) opposition , and the scandal contributed to the minister 's retirement in early 1978 . On 3 February 1977 , the German Bundestag debated the scandal and its consequences . The Rudel Scandal subsequently triggered a military @-@ tradition discussion , which the Federal Minister of Defense Hans Apel ended with the introduction of " Guidelines for Understanding and Cultivating Tradition " on 20 September 1982 .

During the 1978 FIFA World Cup , held in Argentina , Rudel visited the German national football team in their training camp in Ascochinga . The German media criticized the German Football Association (DFB ? Deutscher Fußball @-@ Bund) , and viewed Rudel 's visit as being sympathetic to the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina following the 1976 Argentine coup d'état . The president of the DFB , Hermann Neuberger , justified the visit , and stated that criticizing Rudel 's visit was " an insult to all German soldiers " (" käme einer Beleidigung aller deutschen Soldaten gleich ") . The German team captain , Berti Vogts , further fostered the criticism by stating after the World Cup : " Argentina is a country governed by law and order . I have not seen a single political prisoner . " (" Land , in dem Ordnung herrscht . Ich habe keinen einzigen politischen Gefangenen gesehen ") Rudel had already visited a German team at a World Cup before . He was a spectator of the 1954 FIFA World Cup Final in Switzerland , and during the 1958 FIFA World Cup in Sweden , he visited the German team at Malmö following its 3 : 1 victory over Argentina on 8 June 1958 . There he was welcomed by team manager Sepp Herberger .

= = = Personal life = = =

Rudel was married three times . His 1942 marriage to Ursula , nicknamed " Hanne " , produced two sons , Hans @-@ Ulrich and Siegfried . They divorced in 1950 . According to the news magazine Der Spiegel , one reason for the divorce was that his wife had sold some of his decorations , including the Oak Leaves with Diamonds , to an American collector , but she also refused to move to Argentina . On 27 March 1951 , Der Spiegel published Ursula Rudel 's denial of selling his

decorations , and further stated she had no intention of doing so . Rudel married his second wife , Ursula née Daemisch in 1965 . The marriage produced his third son , Christoph , born in 1969 . Following his divorce in 1977 , he married Ursula née Bassfeld .

= = = Death and funeral = = =

Rudel died after suffering another stroke in Rosenheim on 18 December 1982 , and was buried in Dornhausen on 22 December 1982 . During Rudel 's burial ceremony , two Bundeswehr F @-@ 4 Phantoms appeared to make a low altitude flypast over his grave . Although Dornhausen was situated in the middle of a flightpath regularly flown by military aircraft , Bundeswehr officers denied deliberately flying aircraft over the funeral . Four mourners were photographed giving Nazi salutes at the funeral , and were investigated under a law banning the display of Nazi symbols . The Federal Minister of Defense Manfred Wörner declared that the flight of the aircraft had been a normal training exercise .

= = Summary of military career = =

Rudel flew 2 @,@ 530 combat missions on the Eastern Front of World War II . The majority of these were undertaken while flying the Junkers Ju 87 , although 430 were flown in the ground @-@ attack variant of the Focke @-@ Wulf Fw 190 . He was credited with the destruction of 519 tanks , severely damaging the battleship Marat , as well as sinking a cruiser , a destroyer and 70 landing craft . Rudel also claimed to have destroyed more than 800 vehicles of all types , over 150 artillery , anti @-@ tank or anti @-@ aircraft positions , 4 armored trains , as well as numerous bridges and supply lines . Rudel was also credited with 9 aerial victories , 7 of which were fighter aircraft and 2 Ilyushin Il @-@ 2s . He was shot down or forced to land 30 times due to anti @-@ aircraft artillery , was wounded five times and rescued six stranded aircrew from enemy held territory .

= = = Awards = = =

Honor Goblet of the Luftwaffe (Ehrenpokal der Luftwaffe) as Oberleutnant in a Sturzkampfgeschwader (20 October 1941)

Wound Badge in Gold

Pilot / Observer Badge in Gold with Diamonds

German Cross in Gold on 2 December 1941 as Oberleutnant in the III . / Sturzkampfgeschwader 2

Iron Cross (1939)

2nd Class (10 November 1939)

1st Class (18 July 1941)

Front Flying Clasp of the Luftwaffe in Gold and Diamonds with Pennant " 2000 "

in Gold (18 July 1941)

in Gold and Diamonds with Pennant " 2000 "

Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Golden Oak Leaves , Swords , and Diamonds

Knight 's Cross on 6 January 1942 as Oberleutnant and Staffelkapitän of the 9 . / Sturzkampfgeschwader 2 " Immelmann "

229th Oak Leaves on 14 April 1943 as Oberleutnant and Staffelkapitän of the 1 . / Sturzkampfgeschwader 2 " Immelmann "

42nd Swords on 25 November 1943 as Hauptmann and Gruppenkommandeur of the III . / Sturzkampfgeschwader 2 " Immelmann "

10th Diamonds on 29 March 1944 as Major and Gruppenkommandeur of the III . / Schlachtgeschwader 2 " Immelmann "

1st Golden Oak Leaves on 29 December 1944 as Oberstleutnant and Geschwaderkommodore of Schlachtgeschwader 2 " Immelmann "

8th (1st and only foreign) Hungarian Gold Medal of Bravery (14 January 1945)

Italian Silver Medal of Military Valor

Mentioned five times in the Wehrmachtbericht (27 March 1944 , 28 March 1944 , 3 June 1944 , 6 August 1944 , 10 February 1945)

= = = Wehrmachtbericht references = = =

= = = Promotions = = =

= = Publications = =