

= Otto Kittel =

Otto " Bruno " Kittel (21 February 1917 ? 14 or 16 February 1945) was a World War II Luftwaffe flying ace . He flew 583 combat missions on the Eastern Front , claiming 267 aerial victories , making him the fourth highest scoring ace in aviation history . Kittel claimed all of his victories flying the Messerschmitt Bf 109 and Focke @-@ Wulf Fw 190 against the Red Air Force .

Kittel joined the Luftwaffe in 1939 , at the age of 22 and flew his first combat missions in 1941 . In spring 1941 , he joined Jagdgeschwader 54 (JG 54) supporting Army Group North on the Eastern Front . Kittel claimed his first victory on 22 June 1941 , the opening day of Operation Barbarossa . Kittel took time to amass his personal tally of aerial victories . By February 1943 , he reached 39 kills , relatively insignificant when compared with some other German aces . In 1943 , his tally began to increase when JG 54 began to operate the Fw 190 . Kittel earned the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes) on 29 October 1943 , for reaching 120 aerial victories . By the time he was awarded the decoration he had a tally of 123 victories . Many of the Soviet aircraft shot down by Kittel were IL @-@ 2 Shturmoviks .

During the remainder of World War II , Kittel was credited with 144 more aerial victories and was awarded the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords . On 14 or 16 February 1945 , flying his 583rd combat mission , Kittel was shot down and killed by the air gunner of a Shturmovik . Kittel was the most successful German fighter pilot to be killed in action .

= = Personal life = =

Kittel was born on 21 February 1917 in Kronsdorf (Krasov) near Krnov in Sudeten Silesia , Austria @-@ Hungary . His father was Eduard Kittel , a farmer . Contrary to the public perception of fighter pilots , author Franz Kurowski describes Kittel as reserved and soft @-@ spoken .

Fascinated with flight at an early age , after working briefly as an auto mechanic Kittel joined the Luftwaffe in 1939 at the age of 22 . After completing his training on 12 February 1941 , Kittel was posted to JG 54 based at Jever , Germany . He was assigned to 2 Staffel (Squadron) JG 54 at the rank of Unteroffizier . During his training he was described as a good comrade on account of his calm demeanour , presence of mind and sense of duty . Owing to these attributes , his superior officers treated him with respect . During his training and early career Hannes Trautloft became a role model and offered Kittel advice about his techniques .

Kittel formed a friendship with German ace Hans Philipp , who often shared advice about aerial combat . Philipp later served as a pastor when Kittel married his fiancé , Edith , in June 1942 at Krasnogvardeysk , after she had travelled into occupied Soviet territory to be with him . The couple had a son , Manfred , who was born in 1945 .

= = World War II = =

Kittel 's first operations were air superiority missions during the Balkans Campaign . Assigned to support the German invasion of Yugoslavia and the bombing of Belgrade , Kittel 's Geschwader (Wing) was credited with 376 aerial victories by the time of the Yugoslavian surrender on 17 April 1941 . During the course of the campaign Kittel acted as wingman for his staffel leader , who was the first to engage any enemy aircraft , and Kittel saw only limited air combat . His only combat actions were during strafing missions against Yugoslav Army forces . On 12 May 1941 , JG 54 handed over its old Bf 109E fighters to Jagdgeschwader 77 (Fighter Wing 77) , and Kittel began intensive training on the new Bf 109F .

= = = Operation Barbarossa = = =

Operation Barbarossa , the German invasion of the Soviet Union , began on 22 June 1941 . In the fortnight prior , JG 54 had been moved to an airfield in Lindenthal near Rautenberg , East Prussia , present @-@ day Uslovoje in Kaliningrad Oblast . Tasked with supporting Army Group North in its

advance through the Baltic states towards Leningrad , the unit began combat operations shortly afterwards . On 24 June 1941 , Kittel claimed his first two aerial victories , two Tupolev SB @-@ 2 bombers , shot down during an early morning mission . On 30 June 1941 , he downed his first Ilyushin Il @-@ 2 Shturmovik . His third victory earned him the Iron Cross , Second Class (Eisernes Kreuz zweiter Klasse) . By that time , the German advance had taken JG 54 to Staraya Russa , just south of Leningrad , and they would remain there for nearly two years .

By winter 1941 ? 1942 , he had 11 victories and was awarded the Iron Cross First Class (Eisernes Kreuz erster Klasse) in October 1941 . In mid @-@ March , Kittel claimed two Shturmoviks for his 13 ? 14 aerial victories but his Bf 109 suffered damage and Kittel returned to base , resisting the urge to chase more and risk his life . His motto was to get back in one piece and avoid risks : " Take the safe route and avoid ill @-@ considered and wild offensive tactics " . In the end that alone produced success , risking himself for a single victory was not Kittel 's way . Within two months , his tally had risen to 17 and in May 1942 , Kittel claimed two more victories : a bomber and a fighter , in one sortie . During the combat , he became involved in a dogfight with two experienced opponents ; the Soviet pilots tried to force him into a trap , one chasing the other in an attempt to cut him off . Kittel 's aircraft was fired on several times and hit but he managed to shoot down one of the Soviet fighters and make his escape .

= = = Leningrad Front = = =

During the summer of 1942 , aerial victories were rare ; operating in the northern sector of the front usually meant little action as all the Soviet air activity was combating Army Group South 's summer offensive , codenamed Case Blue . Kurowski recounts that Kittel became frustrated at this time , although his ground crew worked to keep up his spirits . On 19 February 1943 , Feldwebel Kittel achieved his 39th victory , which was also JG 54 's 4,000th of the war . JG 54 Geschwaderkommodore (Wing Commander) Hannes Trautloft congratulated Kittel , and decreed that he was no longer to be assigned the role of wingman , but would instead be allowed to conduct lone combat patrols . In early 1943 , JG 54 was withdrawn from the frontline to convert to the Fw 190 . With a stronger undercarriage for the harsher conditions on the Eastern Front , greater firepower , speed and agility , the fighter was popular among pilots . Kittel , in particular , was pleased . The Fw 190 was an ideal interceptor against the tough and heavily armoured Shturmovik , his favourite target . At this point , after returning to combat , Kittel 's victory tally climbed rapidly . By mid @-@ March 1943 , Kittel had reached 46 victories , encompassing all types of aircraft .

On 14 or 15 March 1943 while on a mission over the Demyansk pocket , Kittel 's Fw 190 suffered engine failure . He was 80 kilometers (50 mi) behind Soviet lines . He removed his precision board clock , an intricately engineered instrument which he was under orders to secure , and landed his Fw 190 which slid 150 meters (490 ft) to a stop in a snow @-@ covered field . During the landing , fellow pilot Herbert Broennle , who had been shot down under similar circumstances , advised Kittel over the radio to hide after landing , to travel only by night and to march compass bearing of 255 degrees (north @-@ west) which would take him to Staraya Russa , towards JG 54 's base behind German lines . After exiting his aircraft , Kittel ran for the nearest forest after landing as several locals began emerging from nearby houses . When Kittel got to the forest , he found he had left his emergency rations behind , having only a chocolate bar with him . He continued through the forest . In the dense vegetation , he was able to move during the day unseen . Resting often , he raided several empty houses and found clothes but no food . Determined to find food , and dressed as a Russian peasant , he passed through several Soviet checkpoints looking for something to eat . Kittel spoke Czech and some Russian and managed to evade detection . En route , he stopped at several points and was given food , and eventually Kittel made it to the edge of Lake Ilmen . After nightfall he crossed the frozen lake and made it to German lines , three days after his crash landing .

Following his return , Kittel was promoted to Oberfeldwebel (staff sergeant) on 18 March 1943 . Kittel took leave in March / April 1943 . By the time he returned Walter Nowotny had taken over the Gruppe (Group) . Philipp had left to take command of Jagdgeschwader 1 (JG 1) in Germany , and was later killed in action on 8 October 1943 . On 3 May 1943 , Kittel scored his first aerial victories

since his return , claiming three Soviet aircraft in an operation before machine gun fire from a bomber 's rear gunner damaged his aircraft and forced him to crash land . On 10 June 1943 , Kittel achieved another aerial victory , taking his total to 50 .

= = = Kursk and the Baltic = = =

During the fighting in mid @-@ 1943 , JG 54 took part in many of the spring battles over the Crimea Peninsula , Vyazma @-@ Bryansk , Vitebsk , Kharkov , Orsha and Orel regions . As the spring battles ended , the Germans prepared for Operation Citadel , which led to the Battle of Kursk . During the air battles that followed Kittel 's unit escorted Junkers Ju 87 Stukas of III . / Sturzkampfgeschwader 2 (Third Group , StG 2 , or Dive Bomber Wing 2) , commanded by Hans @-@ Ulrich Rudel .

On 5 July 1943 , the Germans launched their attack . By this date , Kittel had claimed 56 victories . During the first day of Citadel , Kittel became an " ace @-@ in @-@ a @-@ day " claiming six victories . The next day he shot down three more Soviet aircraft . It was at this point Kittel achieved recognition as one of the most prominent German aces . After the German defeat at Kursk , Kittel 's combat career continued as the German Army retreated to the Dnieper River . Kittel had achieved a one kill per day average to reach 94 victories on 4 September 1943 . Just 10 days later , on 14 September 1943 , Kittel claimed his 100th aerial victory , a Yakovlev Yak @-@ 9 fighter . The 53rd Luftwaffe pilot to achieve the century mark , he received the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes) on 29 October 1943 . By the time he was awarded it on 29 October , his tally was 123 aerial victories . The presentation was made by Oberst Franz Reuß .

On 1 November 1943 , Kittel was promoted to the rank of Leutnant (second lieutenant) . From then until January 1944 Kittel served as the chief instructor of the Ergänzungs @-@ Jagdgruppe Ost (Training Group East) in Biarritz , France , providing instructor to trainee fighter pilots . Unhappy in a teaching role , Kittel filed several applications to return to combat , and in March 1944 his request was approved . Kittel subsequently returned to JG 54 on the Eastern Front .

In early April , achieved his 150th aerial victory . On April 14 , he was awarded the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes mit Eichenlaub) for his 152nd aerial victory , claimed on 12 April . Kittel received the Oak Leaves from Adolf Hitler at the Berghof , Obersalzberg on 5 May 1944 , becoming the 449th German to receive the award . In May 1944 , 2 . Staffel was transferred to augment III . Gruppe (3rd group) of JG 54 fighting on the Western Front to provide air defense for the Reich amidst increasing Allied aerial attacks . In August 1944 , a new 2 . Staffel was formed from remnants of 3 . Staffel , and Kittel was appointed its Staffelkapitän (squadron leader) .

Kittel continued to increase his tally , shooting down another 50 aircraft by 26 August 1944 , bringing his overall total to 200 . By this time , Kittel had converted to flying a Fw 190A @-@ 6 , designated " Yellow 5 " . By the 27 October 1944 , Kittel had achieved 254 victories , a total of 102 in just six months . He earned the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords (Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes mit Eichenlaub und Schwertern) on 25 November 1944 for 264 victories , only the 113th German serviceman to receive the award . Kittel flew to Hitler 's headquarters to receive the award and then continued to Germany to spend his leave there . When he returned in January 1945 , he took JG 54 's second squadron , 2 Staffel . Kittel added a further three victories during his time as the Staffel 's leader . By 13 February 1945 , Kittel had a personal total of 266 aerial victories .

At 12 : 06 on 14 or 16 February 1945 , Kittel took off with his Geschwader (Wing) flying Fw 190 A @-@ 8 " Black 1 " (Werknummer ? factory number ? 690 282) to engage a formation of 14 Shturmovik aircraft over the Courland Pocket . His wingman , Oberfähnrich Renner , later reported : At 12 : 13 he made contact with the formation at low altitude , no more than 100 ? 150 meters (330 ? 490 ft) . Kittel attacked , firing at and damaging several Shturmovik . Kittel damaged one aircraft and chased it . As he closed in for the kill , his Focke @-@ Wulf was hit by return fire from a rear gunner , and descended towards the ground on fire . Kittel , probably incapacitated and unable to use his parachute , did not bail out and the Fw 190 crashed in flames . The site of the crash is

believed to have been 6 kilometers (3 @.@ 7 mi) south @-@ west of D??kste in Latvia .
Witnesses from Kittel 's formation reported that a Shturmovik had been shot down by Kittel before
he himself was killed during the air battle having scored his 267th and final victory .

= = Awards = =

Wound Badge in Black

Ehrenpokal der Luftwaffe on 21 December 1942 as Feldwebel and pilot

Front Flying Clasp of the Luftwaffe in Gold with Pennant " 500 "

Combined Pilots @-@ Observation Badge

German Cross in Gold on 18 March 1943 as Feldwebel in the 2 . / JG 54

Iron Cross (1939)

2nd Class (30 June 1941)

1st Class (October 1941)

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

Knight 's Cross on 29 October 1943 as Oberfeldwebel (Master Sergeant or First Sergeant) and
pilot in the 2 . / JG 54

449th Oak Leaves on 11 April 1944 as Leutnant (Second Lieutenant) pilot in the 1 . / JG 54

113th Swords on 25 November 1944 as Oberleutnant (First Lieutenant) (war officer) and
Staffelkapitän of the 2 . / JG 54