

## **Chapter Twelve**

### *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring visits the Night Fighters

I no longer remember the exact date, but it must have been in late Autumn 1943, a few weeks after my return to operations after being wounded - the Battle of Berlin was at its height – when the entire night-fighter *Geschwader*, several hundred men, were on parade for a visit by the *Reichsmarschall*.

It was one of those well-known military ceremonies, with falling in, marching in step, loud orders, short and brisk reporting, that make such a great impression, above all on young people. The climax of this type of military parade was the Ceremonial Tattoo, in which stately Church music was played by military bands and the muffled roll of drums created the desired atmosphere. Even today, as an old man, I still feel a sort of bodily shiver when I watch a ceremonial tattoo on television and see the young men and hear the music of ‘I pray to the power of love.’ What kind of love is it when drums and music are used to prepare young soldiers to kill and to die?

What was it that Leo Tolstoy so aptly said? ‘Take a boy from his home, dress him in a uniform, give him a rifle and make him march behind the drum – he will become a murderer!’

The *Reichsmarschall* appeared in a column of open Mercedes limousines, accompanied by a bevy of *Generals* in colourful uniforms: he got out and greeted us with ‘*Heil* Night Fighters!’ We replied with a thunderous, ‘*Heil Herr Reichsmarschall!*’ He was a fine figure of a man, portly and festooned with medals, which he would remove towards the end of the war as a form of protest. He made a stirring speech which, as usual, can be summarised as, ‘Hold out, fight on, we are fighting for our nation, we will triumph!’

It is very easy today to vilify the young men of that period for their actions and for their unthinking credulity.

In the First World War this man, along with Richthofen and Udet, had been a famous fighter pilot. After the Allies had forbidden it for decades it was he who had built up a new Air Force for us and who before the war, as Air Minister, had

developed *Lufthansa* into one of the greatest airlines in Europe. In 1938 the Me 109 was the fastest fighter aircraft in the world. Before the war the FW 200, a four-engined airliner, flew from Berlin to New York non-stop in twenty hours, something that the Americans with their flying boats were unable to do and which, no doubt for political reasons as well, led them to refuse a bilateral agreement. It was not until after the war, towards the end of the nineteen-fifties, that the Americans were able to carry out comparable long-range flights with the DC4 and the Constellation. Göring's technical adviser, the well-known aviator Ernst Udet, had spent some time in the United States and had made many contacts there. The celebrated trans-Atlantic flier Lindbergh had visited Göring on a number of occasions and had written admiring articles about the new German aviation.

But back to Göring's visit to us. The *Reichsmarschall* now strode along the front rank of night fighters standing rigidly to attention. He exchanged a few words with many of us. When he came to me he pointed at my wound badge and asked me how I had won it. 'Shot down by the British over Berlin, *Herr Reichsmarschall!*' 'Where, my son?' - 'Grunewalddamm 69.' He laughed, felt in the right-hand pocket of his tunic and presented me with the Iron Cross First Class.

Standing next to me was a crew of three who had also been wounded and shot down and had baled out. Göring put the same question, first of all the to the pilot, a *Feldwebel*, who replied, 'Shot down by the *Flak* over Bremen, *Herr Reichsmarschall!*' The *Reichsmarschall* mumbled something involuntarily, and of course the *Feldwebel* did not get a medal. Next in line was the wireless operator of the same crew. 'And where did you earn your wound badge?' '*Herr Reichsmarschall*, shot down by the *Flak* over Bremen!' Göring's face went red, and he shouted for the Commanding *General* of the *Flak*. '*Herr General*,' he shouted so that everyone could hear him, 'What do you think you are doing to my boys?' We had an uneasy feeling that something bad was going to happen. Göring had clearly not realised that this was a matter of only one crew, not three separate aircraft. When it was the air gunner's turn he could only stammer, '*Flak* Bremen, *Herr Reichsmarschall!*' Red in the face, Goring turned to the *General* of the *Flak*: '*Herr General*, do you know what I will do if this happens again?' '*Nein, Herr Reichsmarschall!*' 'I'll have a wound badge branded on your arse!' It was the old imperialist officer and *Staffelkapitän* in the *Richthofen Geschwader* in the First World War, ranting and raving and identifying with his airmen.

Finally Göring asked if there was anyone who had a special request. At once a ground-crew *Oberfeldwebel* answered that he would like to fly on night fighters. Göring turned to our *Kommandeur*, and said, ‘This man will fly on operations tonight!’ Poldi, our *Kommandeur*, nudged me. ‘Spoden, quick. Ask something sensible!’ Taking my courage into my hands I asked, ‘*Herr Reichsmarschall*, we would very much appreciate a few bottles of cognac from the *Herr Reichsmarschall*’s private stores!’ ‘Granted, my son!’ ‘*Heil Fliers!*’ ‘*Heil, Herr Reichsmarschall!*’ and Göring drove off in his limousine. The following morning a Fieseler Storch landed at Parchim. The pilot had brought a case of real French cognac, Napoleon brand, for *Leutnant* Spoden, no doubt from stocks commandeered in Paris. I was a very popular man.

Most of us, of course, had similar experiences. Göring was the most popular of the powers-that-be in the Third *Reich*. ‘Our Hermann’ will look after us,’ most of us believed, and we trusted him. But unlike his fliers he had known of the atrocities in the East, and so he had to accept responsibility. And for that he was eventually hanged by the Allies after he had taken his own life. *Vae Victis!*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Vae Victis*: ‘Woe betide the conquered!’