



LAST DAYS OF THE LUFTWAFFE: GERMAN LUFTWAFFE COMBAT UNITS, 1944-1945

BY MANFRED GRIEHL

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Review by
Major William March, CD, MA

Manfred Griehl is a prolific writer who specializes in examining various aspects of the *Luftwaffe* during World War II. His latest book, *Last Days of the Luftwaffe*, is an extremely interesting and welcome addition to the study of this formidable air power adversary.

The book itself focuses on the last two years of the war when the *Luftwaffe*, far from its glory days in 1939–1941, was in the midst of a downward spiral towards ultimate defeat. Pressed on all sides by growing numbers of Allied aircraft, pummeled from the air with round-the-clock bombing and internally beset by erratic leadership and a dysfunctional organizational culture, the mere fact that the German air force continued to fight until May 1945 was an achievement in itself. However, as Griehl points out in his work, the continued production of aircraft in ever growing numbers coupled with the continued development of new technology in an attempt to regain air power ascendancy was remarkable.

For the reader who relishes minute detail on combat units and/or aircraft variants, *Last Days of the Luftwaffe* is a treasure trove. The author provides abundant information on

frenzied improvements to propeller-driven fighters (such as the Me-109 and FW-190 series), the new jet aircraft (such as the Me-262 and the Ar-234) and the formations that flew them. In addition, the book contains a wealth of data on lesser known elements of German air power development and innovation during the closing months of the war. Work on advanced jet-prototypes, the production drawings of which bear an uncanny resemblance to modern aircraft, continued up to the end of the war as did work on new technology such as radio-guided bombs, unmanned aircraft and “flak rockets”—now called surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). And I must comment on the excellent photographs included in this book—the author amply illustrates his discussion with well-chosen archival pictures.

The sheer magnitude and number of programs is staggering. And it speaks not only to the productivity and vision of the German engineers and scientists, but also to the sense of desperation and delusion that seemed to permeate the senior ranks of the *Luftwaffe* as it was slowly being destroyed. The apparent inability of the German military establishment to recognize its limitations and focus on a few manageable/affordable programs is evident

throughout this book. Instead of dealing with reality, the *Luftwaffe* seemed more content to grasp at straws and seek “wonder weapons” with which to snatch victory from a fast approaching defeat.

Matching this surreal belief that superior German technology would somehow save the day was a feeling that national-socialist ideology and a superior sense of duty could also counter Allied air superiority. In chapters entitled “Cannon Fodder” and “Self-Sacrifice,” the author describes efforts to produce aircrew with minimal training to fly manned missiles, ram their airplanes into Allied bombers and conduct a variety of “special operations” whereby a young life was to be traded in a suicidal attempt at aerial victory. Perhaps the most chilling chapter is the attempts by the *Waffen-SS* to carve out an *SS*-controlled air force. German reliance on slave-labour and draconian discipline aside, one can only imagine what this change would have meant to the conduct of the air war in Europe.

Although I found this book very interesting, it is not without its flaws. Some are minor, such as referring to an attack on German bombers by 401 Squadron of the Royal Air Force (RAF) when it belonged to the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), and others are major—the lack of sources and a bibliography. More than anything else these latter

flaws will hamper researchers and writers who want to delve more deeply into the various materials included in the book. As well, to a certain extent I found the book a bit incoherent as it wandered from subject to subject; however, this may have been unavoidable given the depth and breadth of the subject.

Faults aside, I believe that the book is a worthwhile read. Not only does it give some insight into the last days of our last “peer” air power adversary, it also underscores the lengths to which a determined foe is willing to go—a lesson most appropriate in today’s security environment. Perhaps as important, is the need to provide control and oversight for research and development programmes to ensure that they match the organization’s needs and resources. This is true whether your environment is constrained by combat or political/economic limitations. In the end, it doesn’t matter how many good ideas you have if you lack the resources and time to make them reality. ■

Major William March, a maritime Airborne Combat Systems Officer, is the Academic Liaison Officer at the Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre. He has taught Canadian defence and air power history at the undergraduate level and is currently pursuing his doctorate in War Studies at the Royal Military College.