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WORLD WAR TWO IN THE AIR

The Old Puma of the Hungarian Air Force

Meet Lt. Col. de Heppes von Belenyés, now of the U.S.A., once a feared enemy wartime flyer.

by Walter Musciano

Little publicity has been given to the Royal Hungarian Air Force and its exploits during the Second World War. Caught in a vise between the Soviet and United States Air Forces the Hungarians fought against odds of twenty to one and more, yet this kingdom-without-a-king had aces with official 30 victories. All belonged to the same unit and were commanded by a leader who, on the average, was twice their age. He was known along the Eastern Front as the "Old Puma".

For a moment let us turn back to that earlier First World War when an enormous Austro-Hungarian Empire was in partnership with Germany. After the armistice the victorious Allied nations stripped the empire of three fourths of her land; with this territory was created Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Romania also got large chunks of Hungary. Almost four million Hungarians, more than half of the population, found themselves under foreign rule. By 1919 the Hungarian Communists, under Bela Kun, had cap-

tured the government. Then their chaotic rule was overthrown and the monarchy, sans king, restored. The Treaty of Trianon prohibited the formation of any air force and limited the size of the Hungarian army.

The defeated nation missed its lost lands and was eager for their return. Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania, realizing this, began re-arming. They also formed an alliance, the "Little Entente". Hungary formed a secret air force in 1921. Later it joined the anti-communist Three Power Pact of Germany, Italy and Japan. As reward Germany gave Hungary part of Slovakia and all of Ruthenia from Czechoslovakia in 1938 and northern Transylvania from Romania in 1940. Hungary now purchased most of her aircraft from Italy plus some bombing types from Germany.

The supposedly secret Hungarian Air Force developed a training program for air and ground crews under such cover names as "Air Mail Branch" and "Meteorological Section". Most



Lt. Col. Heppes during World War Two.

pilot instruction was provided via government sponsored flying clubs. Since the goal of this tiny air arm was to prepare for the possibility of fighting the "Little Entente", rather than a major power like Russia, its somewhat inferior Italian aircraft were good enough. Then in 1935 the Royal Hungarian Air Force was announced to the world. Later Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 and Hungary found herself in partnership with the Nazi war machine—as a result she was hit by Russian bombers four days later.

An outstanding Royal Hungarian Air Force leader during this period was Alezredes (Lt. Col.) Aladar de Heppes von Belenyés, a professional officer of noble birth, known as the "Old Puma". Heppes, the second son



Left: The Old Puma instructs his men prior to the ground fighting during the defense of Ilovskoye. Heppes and his men, surrounded by the Soviet Army ground forces in January 1943, held off the Red troops for ten days. Center:



Heppes (at left) discusses the air defense of Hungary with commander-in-chief of the Royal Hungarian Air Force (beaucoup ribbons) during their troublesome days of Autumn 1944. Bottom, right: During the final months of the war the

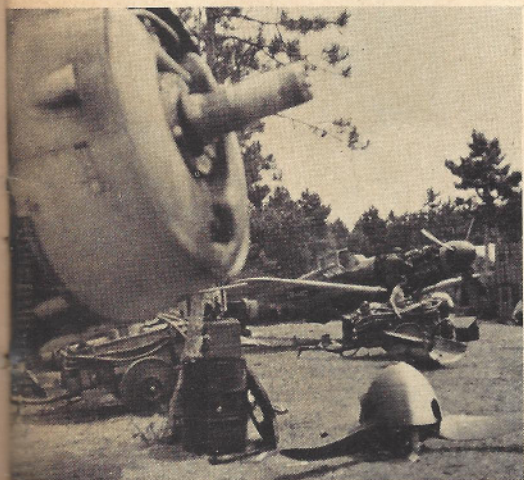
sledge-hammer blows of the mighty U.S. and Soviet Air Forces forced the Pumas into drastic measures to keep their planes flying. Here, Messerschmitts are being repaired and overhauled in forest clearings surrounding the Veszprem airfield.

AIR PROGRESS

of a supreme court justice, was born in the western Hungarian town of Arad in 1904.

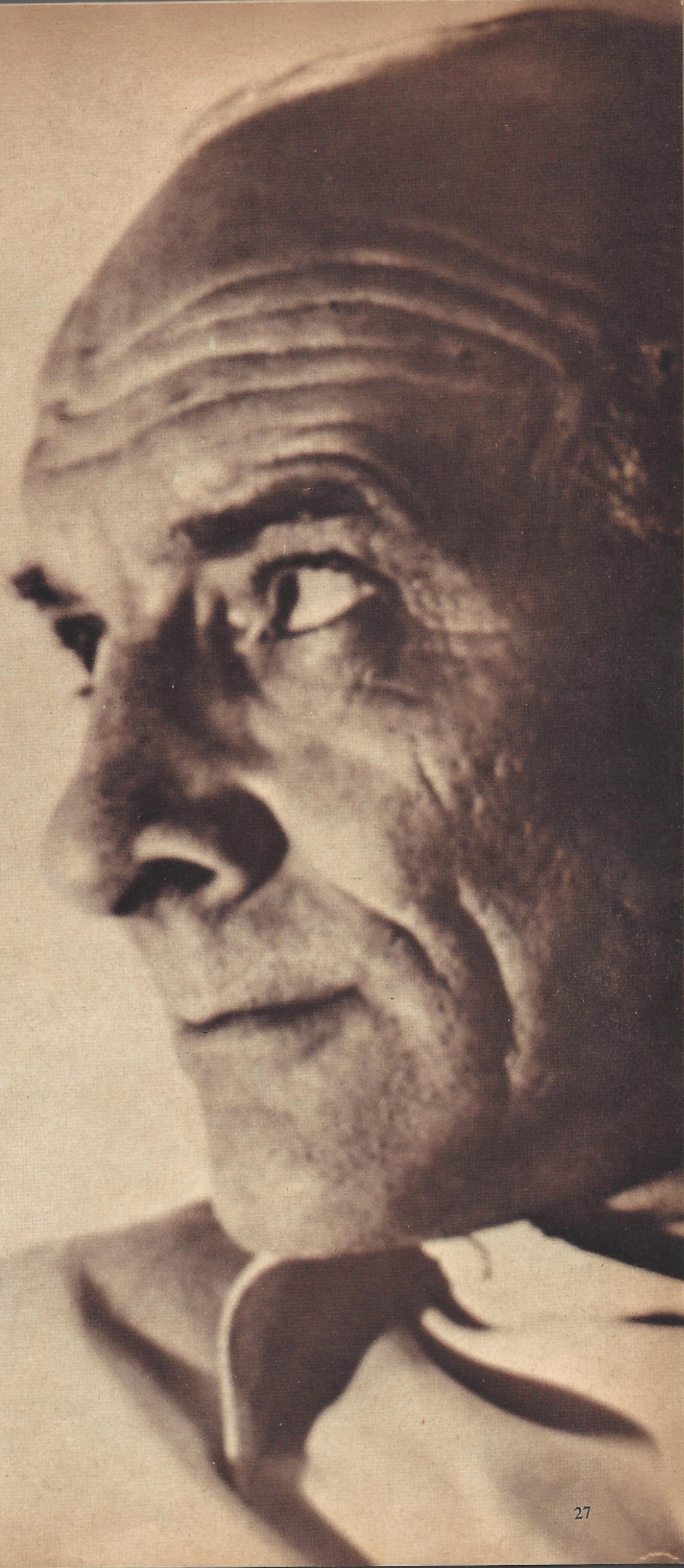
Upon completion of his college training the cadet applied for the then still secret air force; in 1928 Aladar made his solo hop from Szombathely near the Austrian border. On August 2 he was promoted to "chief controller" (first lieutenant—Fohadnagy) since all air force personnel still wore civilian clothing and bore non-military titles; he piloted such ancient craft as Brandenburgs, Hungarias and the Heinkel HD-22. His next flying job was with the Third Short Range Reconnaissance Squadron in 1930. The unit, based in Kapsovar in southwestern Hungary, was equipped with the Fokker C-V, lumbering two-seat observation planes. Then in 1935 Aladar was sent as executive officer to 1/III Fighter Squadron based in Szekesfehervar; this "Meteorological Sub-section" flew the Italian-built Fiat CR-30 and its replacement, the Fiat CR-32 biplane. Aladar de Heppes, who felt a squadron insignia improved the "esprit de corps" of the pilots and ground crew alike, designed a snarling puma head emblem for the unit. The CR-32 squadron moved to Veszprem in 1936. There during October 1937 Heppes became squadron commander. The "Puma Squadron" developed into the finest unit in the new Royal Hungarian Air Force. In November 1938 Aladar was promoted to Szazados (Captain). Eleven months later Heppes was at Matyasfold as adjutant to the commanding officer of 1/II Fighter Group. The C.O. was his brother Miklos.

When war with the Soviet Union began in June 1941 the R.H.A.F. had two fighter wings, two bomber wings and one reconnaissance squadron—



Right: Industrial designer Heppes as he appears today. The ace is now a U.S. citizen and has a home on six beautiful suburban acres. The Old Puma, a talented engineer, has developed many innovations for his adopted country.

JUNE 1967



ALADAR DE HEPPESS MESSERSCHMITT Me-109G

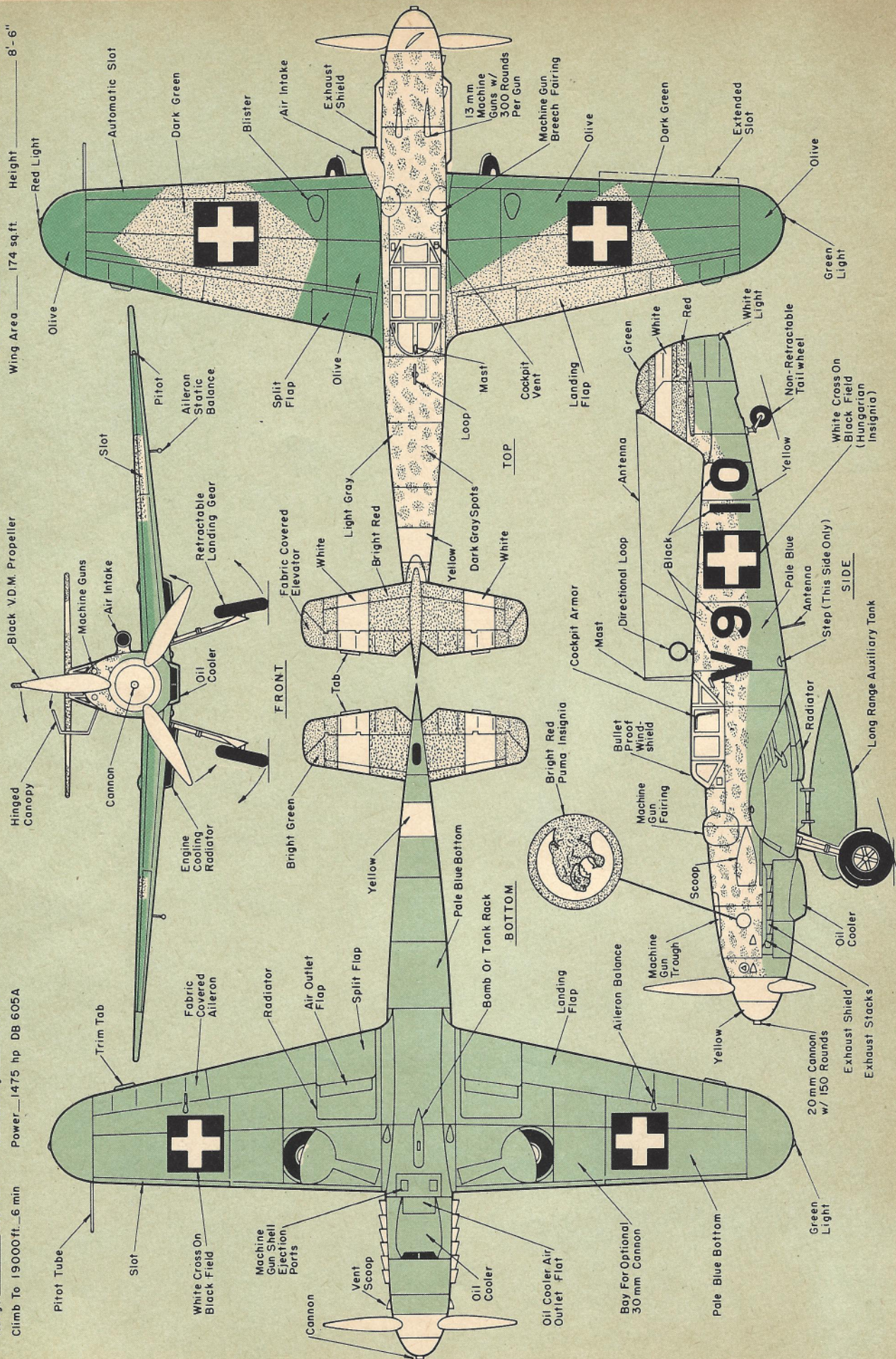
PERFORMANCE

Max. Speed _____ 387 mph
 Range _____ 615 mi
 Climb To 19000 ft. _____ 6 min
 Service Ceiling _____ 38500 ft.
 Max. Ceiling _____ 39750 ft.
 Power _____ 1475 hp DB 605A

Scale In Feet
 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

SPECIFICATIONS

Span _____ 32'-6 1/2"
 Length _____ 29'-8"
 Wing Area _____ 174 sq. ft.
 Max. Weight _____ 7500 Lbs
 Empty Wt. _____ 5900 Lbs
 Height _____ 8'-6"



approximately 350 aircraft, all obsolete. That September Aladar Heppes was placed in command of 1/II Fighter Group. Equipped only with the Fiat CR-42, when one of his squadrons was sent to Russia, it was found the antiquated biplanes could only be used for ground attack. The unit was quickly recalled. New combat tactics by the larger nations forced 1/II Group to learn modern fighting techniques. They tried out the Italian-built Reggiane RE-2000 monoplane which was scheduled to replace their biplanes.

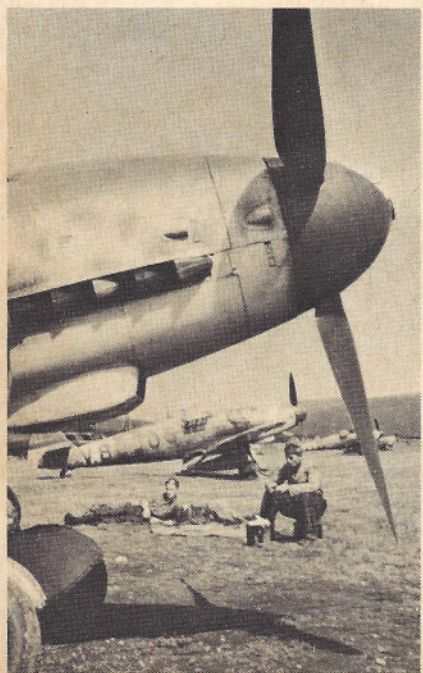
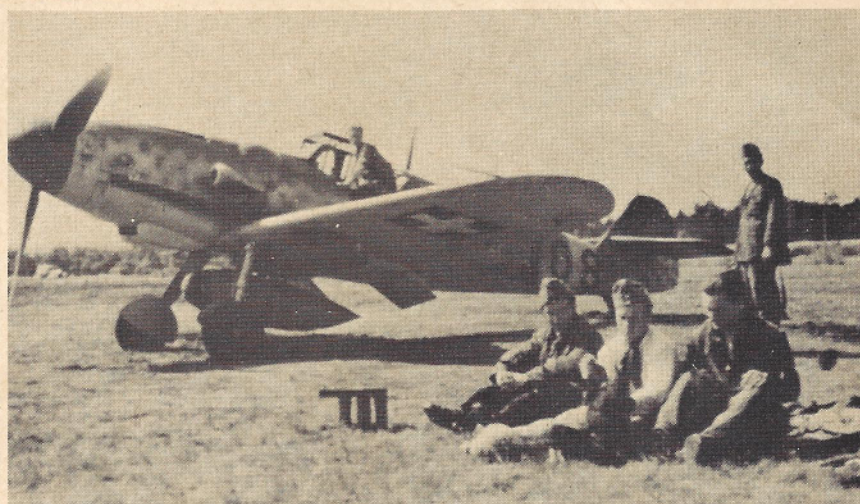
By summer 1942 it became apparent that the German war machine was finding it more and more difficult to subdue the Russian Bear. A Hungarian RE-3000 group led by Kalman Csukas was sent to assist the Germans in the Ukraine. In December 1942 Szazados de Heppes was placed in command of the newly formed 5/I Fighter Group. This included one squadron of Messerschmitt Me-109E fighters carrying the puma emblem which was dispatched to relieve Csukas and his men. Heppes and his Group Staff, plus one squadron, arrived at Ilovskoye air base just before Christmas and took over the aging Reggians. Their engines were balky and flight characteristics poor. As Alexredes (Lt. Col.) Csukas' outfit was about to return to Hungary the Russian Army broke through the German and Hungarian lines (July 13, 1943) and the Ilovskoye airfield was directly in their path.

All aircraft and personnel were ordered to evacuate the field but at 40° F below zero only four of the Reggiane engines would start. All remaining fighters were blown up along with hangars and equipment. Orders from

continued on page 72

The Old Puma *continued*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: *The author extends his sincere thanks to the following who made this article possible: Aladar de Heppes, Laine Tigane, Claudia Bohl and Benton Tiborg.*



Four photographs of Messerschmitt Me-109G fighters of the 101 Fighter Wing (regiment) based at Veszprem, Hungary. Of interest are the small puma insignia above the exhaust stacks, hinged canopy, auxiliary fuel tank, white cross on black field national insignia and spotted fuselage camouflage. Heppes' medals (see pg. 26) included Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit with Swords; Officers Cross of the Order of Merit with Laurel and Swords; German Iron Cross First Class. Shoulder insignia denoted rank of Lt. Colonel.

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SPIRITS, *continued*

Louis", but such was not the case. When a movie was made in 1956 from Lindbergh's own book, appropriately titled "The Spirit of St. Louis", three full-scale reproductions were created by converting antique Ryan B-1's to the old NYP configuration. One was undertaken by Jimmy Stewart, star of the picture and himself a pilot, and his associates, notably Hank Coffin. This was serial number 156, with registration NC7209. The other two were obtained through trades for other antiques by Paul Mantz Air Services, chief supplier of airplanes to the movie industry. The first Mantz conversion was serial number 159 (NC7212) and the second was serial number 153 (NC7206). While the modification to all three were extensive, they did not go so far as to move the pilot aft. The original B-1 controls and instrument panels were retained although the nose contours were modified to those of the NYP. The solid NYP nose panels fitted over conventional forward windshields and side windows. For the flying scenes, only the solid panels on the side that was to be toward the camera plane were installed. The pilot could then see well enough from the opposite side. This feature put the responsibility for position and keeping formation on the pilot of the camera plane.

The three synthetic "Spirits" stayed around Hollywood after the movie was

finished. Stewart eventually donated his to the Ford Museum in Dearborn and the No. 2 Mantz conversion was sold to the Missouri Historical Society. As the 40th anniversary of the Lindbergh flight approaches, two more reproductions were being built. One, by Tallmantz Aviation, successor to Paul Mantz Air Services, will be flown at Paris for the anniversary celebration and will be on display at the Paris Air Show, May 26-June 4. This is not another B-1 conversion but a completely new airplane built from scratch. It will be far more authentic than the others, even to having the 428-gallon fuselage gas tank and the pilot behind it. The second 1967 reproduction is under way as "Project WE", named for Lindbergh's first book, by the San Diego Aerospace Museum. This is for permanent exhibit and the work is being farmed out in bits and pieces to many individuals, some of whom worked on the original in 1927.

For a one-only design, the "Spirit of St. Louis" turned into quite a family—with one original, one true replica, and five reproductions.

The author wishes to express his appreciation to Mr. Everett Cassagneres, Ryan Historian for the Antique Airplane Association and the American Aviation Historical Society, and Mr. William Wagner of the Ryan Aeronautical Company for their cooperation in the preparation of this article.

OLD PUMA

(continued from page 29)

the Army High Command specified that the Air Force personnel must hold off the Soviet steam-roller to permit the establishment of a new defense line. Heppes and his men held off the Reds until every man was evacuated from the town and only then did they follow the long procession. Two days later the airman, turned infantry commander and almost 40, was awarded the German Iron Cross and the Hungarian Signum Laudis for his outstanding performance.

The next two months were spent training with new German fighter planes. By April 1943 Heppes and his 5/I Group were ready for action with their new Me-109G German-designed Messerschmitts. This version, built in larger quantity than any other, is considered to be the finest version of the fighter design. The total Me-109 production was 33,000 airframes; over 14,200 of these were of the G series. Several hundred were produced by Hungarian factories in Győr and Budapest. Normal armament consisted one engine-mounted rapid-fire 20-mm MG 151 cannon and two 13-mm MG 131

machine guns in the upper cowl. Some versions supplemented this with two additional 20-mm MG 151 or 30-mm MK 108 cannon under their wings. Fighter-bomber versions were fitted with a 1100-lb bomb while others carried two 210-mm rockets. The 1475-hp Daimler-Benz DB605A-1 twelve cylinder liquid cooled engine gave the craft to a maximum speed of 387-mph at 23,000-ft altitude. The Puma Group Me's were not equipped with the wing cannon and so had a marked edge in speed and maneuverability. Their Me-109G could climb to 19,000-ft in six minutes and an auxiliary fuel tank extended the fighter's range for escort missions. The scale drawings illustrate the last Messerschmitt Me-109G flown by Aladar de Heppes.

Heppes' code name on combat missions was "oreg puma" (Old Puma); "Hajra Pumaak" (pronounced hoyra pumaak) was the unit's battle cry. This means "onward pumas". 5/I Group, assigned to the Kharkov sector, concentrated on ground support action.

On May 30, 1943 Heppes, leading six Messerschmitts, escorted He-111 and Ju-88 bombers in a raid over the Vaulike railroad yards, 80 miles behind the Russian lines. During the trip home the Old Puma spotted numerous Soviet fighters taking off from the air-

field at Kupyansk. He ordered four of his men to remain with the bombers, then led his wingman to the attack on the Yak fighters. A terrific dogfight ensued with ten to one odds against the Hungarians. After a few passes the Old Puma finished one of the Russian Yaks with a deflection shot. By this time his bombers were safely inside Hungary so Heppes decided to run for safety. As he turned westward a flight of Yaks cut him off; a short burst from his cowl-mounted machine guns killed the nearest Soviet pilot. The Hungarian then sped for home.

The Old Puma scored again on July 6 and August 3 when he shot down an II-2 over Woltschansk and a Yak over Belgorod, Russia. After the latter fight Heppes landed near the front lines when his fuel ran out. It was almost ten hours before a German Fieseler Storch brought enough gasoline for him to take off. When Heppes returned to his base he learned that the Pumas had presumed him dead and reported same to headquarters. As a result, a "dead man" officially commanded the group during the next seven days.

The defense of the Hungarian homeland was now of prime importance. During March 1944 the Old Puma was ordered to organize a home defense interceptor unit, the 101 Fighter Group based at Veszprem. It included three squadrons 40 Me-109G fighters plus transport and courier types, and about 500 men. Hungary was reeling under the sledge hammer blows of the Red Army and its Air Force when a greater calamity happened—the United States Army Air Force began bombing Hungarian targets on April 3, 1944.

Fighting the United States Air Force was an agonizing experience for Heppes and his Pumas. The Soviet Air Force flew in relatively small numbers for a given mission, but the U.S. raids darkened the sky, with as many as 500 bombers plus a liberal fighter escort. It was almost impossible to combat armadas such as these with only forty Messerschmitts, but Heppes led his men again and again in this game of death. The Old Puma opened his victory score against the Americans on May 26 when he shot down two four-engined Liberator bombers over Nazyacsad and Mosonszolnok. Four days later when he dived on a box of B-24 bombers the withering cross fire from the Liberators smashed into his Messerschmitt's cockpit. The .50 calibre slugs missed the pilot but blew off the cockpit enclosure. The screaming slipstream tore away his unfastened helmet. Gasping for air Heppes broke off the attack and turned for home. After landing the pilot found one of the bullets that caused the canopy to blow off had lodged in the plane's structure. He still has the bullet as a memento of his close brush with death.

The Old Puma was promoted to major ornagy in May 1944. He developed open formation attacks on enemy bombers in order to confuse the American gunners. He also made a special effort to attack the four engined giants at their assembly points as they converged on Hungary from the south and west. Heppes instructed his Pumas to head for the bombers, make one firing pass, then break off. This avoided engaging the escorting Mustangs, Lightnings and Thunderbolts, sure suicide for the outnumbered Messerschmitts.

On June 16 twenty-eight Pumas intercepted a formation of 500 Fortresses and Liberators escorted by Thunderbolts, Mustangs and Lightnings. When the fighting was over the wreckage of 22 U.S. planes was found although the men of 101 Group claimed only ten Liberators, four Lightnings, and one each of the P-51 and P-47. While 13 Messerschmitts were destroyed only four pilots lost their lives. Nine Hungarians had bailed out. Ten days later 30 Messerschmitts attacked 90 Liberators with 50 escorting Mustangs and Lightnings. Combined losses were 3 bombers and 2 Mustangs for the Americans and 3 Messerschmitts for the Hungarians. Scattered by the Puma attack, the bombers approached their objective, Vienna, before they could reform. One hundred German fighters then attacked the Americans and scored 15 victories but lost twice that number of their own aircraft.

The second of July witnessed one of the largest air battles fought over Hungary. An enormous formation of Allied bombers and fighters headed for Budapest but was intercepted by 18 Pumas over Pusztaszabolcs. German Me-109 and twin-engine Me-210 fighters from Austria joined the melee. Heppes scored another Liberator on this day while his men destroyed eleven more raiders without no loss to themselves. Apparently the tactics promulgated by the Old Puma were proving effective.

The tenacity and ingenuity of the Old Puma was demonstrated on July 7, 1944 when he led 9 of his men against 60 Liberator bombers and a dozen P-38 Lightnings. Over Hajmasker Heppes scored another bomber, then found himself boxed in by Lightnings. Quick shooting and violent maneuvering enabled the expert flyer to elude his pursuers. With his young wing man, Fohadnagy Iranyi, following closely, the Old Puma sped toward a formation of unescorted B-24 bombers that were returning to Italy. The two Messerschmitts approached the Americans from three o'clock high. As one huge bomber grew in his gun-sight, Heppes pressed the firing button at a range of 600 feet. After discharg-

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OLD PUMA, continued

ing only a few rounds his three guns fell silent. Out of ammunition! The leader signalled Iranyi to fire but the youngster's bullets missed the Liberator by a wide margin. As the two headed toward the bomber a second time Heppes ordered Iranyi to fly close under his starboard wing. Aladar's plan was to lead his wingman's Messerschmitt to the target with last minute aiming corrections via the radio. As soon as the Hungarians came within range the B-24 its waist gunners pumped a torrent of .50 calibre bullets into the leading Me-109. Only when he was close enough to the target to insure a hit, did the Old Puma give the order to fire. After a small correction the shells from Iranyi's cannon found their mark and the four engine craft spiralled into the ground. The duo sped for home as Lightnings appeared in the distance.

In August 1944 Romania, also allied with Germany, capitulated to the Soviet armies and the Russians poured into Hungary's next door neighbor. The entire air defenses of the Magyar nation were now placed in the hands of the Old Puma. He was promoted to Lt. Col. alezredes but with a full colonel's pay. Meanwhile the 101 Fighter Group was enlarged to a full wing. This consisted of the 101/I Group (40 Messerschmitts) based at Veszprem and 101/II Group (20 Messerschmitts) at Kenyeri. The six squadrons totalled 1000 men. By October the retreating 101 Fighter Group was also absorbed into the Ace's command as the third group of his wing, or regiment, which now totalled 1500 men and 100 Messerschmitts (nine squadrons). In November 1944 the Old Puma was grounded by the high command because he was too valuable to risk in the air.

By the spring of 1945 the evacuation of unoccupied Hungary started. The Pumas retreated to airfields near Linz in Austria. Fuel was in short supply, spare parts were non-existent. Soon the Allies were victorious and the war in Europe was over. Aladar de Heppes ordered the destruction of all remaining aircraft.

The Old Puma and his men had fought both Russian and American aircraft. Their tally during the final year was 110 Liberators and Fortresses, 56 U.S. Lightnings, Mustangs and Thunderbolts, 218 assorted Russian aircraft. In these same 12 months the Pumas lost 39 men dead, 20 disabled and less than 100 aircraft. Their final score for the entire war was 454 victories vs. the loss of 68 men.

Aladar de Heppes and many of his Pumas had no desire to return to a Hungary ruled by Communists. Many aces went to Canada, Argentina, Spain

and Austria. The Old Puma remained in Austria and in 1951 came to the United States where he is now an American citizen heading up his own industrial design business.

The ace received the Hungarian Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit with Swords; Officer Cross of the Order of Merit with Laurel Wreath and Swords; Signum Laudis; Combat Cross; Cross of Merit; Honorary German and Croatian Pilot Badges and the German First and Second Class Iron Crosses.

PELLEGRENO

(continued from page 32)

tributions began coming in from companies and individuals.

Bill turned the flight into practically a full time job. Daily he reported progress and Lee and I informed him of any new developments which we turned up. On Friday night, March 17, a pow-wow indicated that someone who had considerable experience with designing fuel tanks for our type of flight must install spare tanks and assure us an FAA-approved dump system as our single-engine performance at over-gross weights would be critical. The flight plan must be prepared. Performance figures must be projected for plane and engines. Upping the 12 volt system to 28 would be necessary. Relieved that many major decisions had been made, that night I dropped Lee off at his house at 1 a.m., drove myself home, and was asleep within 5 minutes.

Bill and I spent the major portion of Sunday, March 19, detail-planning the entire flight. His office turned into a map room. Charts were on every desk. A blackboard became covered with names like Dakar and Karachi. The total daily flight time based on an average ground speed of 140 knots was posted as the legs were measured.

Several substitutions had been recommended in our route by AOPA. Additionally, Bill considered alternate routing to keep the gross weight as low as we could as much of the time as possible. The Natal (Brazil) to Dakar (Senegal, West Africa) leg could be done with an intermediate stop at Ascension Island. Landing at Rabaul (New Britain) on the Lae (New Guinea) to Kwajalein (Marshall Islands) leg would shorten that distance by 350 nautical miles. Our last and longest leg would be from Hawaii to San Francisco. After off-loading as many items as possible at Hawaii to make room for fuel, we could await favorable weather and a good tailwind component.

Adequate provisions had been made for engine maintenance, crew rest, and preparation of the plane for the

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