

Massacre of the JU52s by David Gray



The **Palm Sunday Massacre**, also known as the Goose Shoot, occurred on April 18th 1943, when the 57th Fighter Group of the U.S. Air Force inflicted heavy losses on German transport aircraft during World War II.

The Palm Sunday massacre took place during the North African Campaign, specifically as part of Operation Flax, which aimed to disrupt German supply lines and airlift operations. The German Luftwaffe was heavily reliant on transport aircraft, particularly the Junkers Ju 52, (*left*) to supply and evacuate troops in Tunisia as Allied forces advanced.

The Air Battle

On April 18, 1943, the 57th Fighter Group, flying Curtis P-40 Warhawks, (*below*), was on routine patrol over Cape Bon when they encountered a large formation of over 100 German Ju 52 transport planes, escorted by approximately 50 Messerschmitt fighters. The American pilots, realising the opportunity, launched a surprise attack on the transports, which were flying low and slow over the Mediterranean.



The ensuing battle was chaotic, with American pilots reporting that they shot down a significant number of enemy aircraft. Estimates suggest that the 57th Fighter Group destroyed around 75 German planes, including 58 Ju 52s, while suffering minimal losses themselves. The event was characterised by intense aerial combat, with American pilots dodging falling enemy planes and engaging in dogfights with escorting fighters.

Testimony from one of the Pilots

On that spring afternoon, 48 Warhawks of the 57th Fighter Group, supported by a cover of RAF Spitfires, prepared to turn back for lack of fuel when the formation below was spotted. At first, they estimated 30 transports. In reality, there were much more, escorted by German and Italian fighters.

Captain Roy Whitaker, flying his P-40 *Miss Fury*, led the attack. He later recalled:

"I attacked the Ju52s from astern at high speed and fired at two planes in the leading formation. The bursts were short and the only effect I saw was pieces flying off the cabin of the second ship. I pulled away and circled to the right and made my second attack. I fired two bursts into two more 52s... They both burst into flames... I then made a third pass and sent a good burst into another Junkers. As I pulled away, it crashed into the water. By that time, the 109's were among us. I tagged one and gave him a long burst in the belly. He crashed into the sea. It was a pilot's dream. I'd never seen such a complete massacre of the enemy in my life."

Massacre

The Ju 52s, packed with soldiers, tried desperately to fight back. Eyewitnesses said German infantry fired rifles and machine guns through cabin windows as the transports lumbered forward. Yet the Warhawks cut through them relentlessly. One by one, transports burst into flames or crashed into the sea. Some tried emergency landings on the Tunisian coast, others simply fell apart in midair.

Above, RAF Spitfires kept the escorts engaged, ensuring the transports were left exposed. For the American pilots, the biggest struggle became finding targets before their comrades destroyed them. Ammunition was soon spent, and with fuel running low, the Warhawks finally broke off. What had begun as a massive airlift was reduced to wreckage scattered across sea and shore.

Aftermath

When the battle ended, the tally stunned even the Allies. Reports credited the Americans with 74 victories, 51 of them transports. The *Stars and Stripes* newspaper declared: *"Breaking news. US flyers blast escape planes. Fighters shoot down 51 transport planes bearing Axis troops. Never before in this war were 74 enemy planes shot down in a single engagement."*

Later German records confirmed the scale of the defeat. They said: *24 transports shot down at sea, 35 crash-landed or destroyed on the coast, and several fighters lost.* The April 18th clash became known as the Palm Sunday Massacre, crippling German evacuation and supply efforts.

Significance of the Massacre



The Palm Sunday Massacre had a profound impact on the German airlift capabilities in North Africa. The heavy losses suffered by the Luftwaffe severely affected their ability to supply and evacuate troops, contributing to the eventual surrender of Axis forces in Tunisia. Within weeks of the massacre, over 200,000 Axis troops were captured as the Allies consolidated their control over North Africa.

This event is remembered as a significant victory for the U.S. Air Force and is often highlighted in discussions of air power's role in modern warfare during World War II. The successful engagement demonstrated the effectiveness of Allied air operations and the vulnerabilities of the German supply lines during the campaign.

Another incident concerning an attack on a large formation of JU 52s involved an action a year earlier off the Libyan coast on May 12, 1942. A strong force of British fighters, including Kittyhawks and Beaufighters, attacked a convoy of thirteen Ju 52s, shooting down twelve of them.

This story was reported in a British newspaper later the same day:

'NAZI TROOP PLANES "SHOT DOWN LIKE PARTRIDGES"

RAF PILOTS' ACCOUNT: GERMAN SOLDIERS USED TOMMY-GUNS



The JU 52 carriers which, as reported in *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday, were shot down over the Mediterranean...were full of troops. This was announced by the Air Ministry last night, in a statement giving details of the encounter.

RAF Kittyhawk fighters (*left*), were returning from a sweep when they encountered the large formation of troop carriers – about 20 planes altogether. They shot down 13 Ju 52s and two Me 110s, for the loss of only one of

our planes. It is known that the remaining planes in the formation were badly damaged.

Troops in the planes – each of which can carry 18 fully-equipped men in addition to the crew of five – were seen to be using tommy-guns against the RAF fighters in a desperate effort to avert their fate.

Fought 50ft Over the Sea

The German planes were flying in brilliant sunshine about 50ft over the sea when they were sighted. The RAF fighters immediately went into the attack. In a few moments the first Ju 52 plunged into the waves. "I have never seen anything like the next fifteen minutes," said one fighter pilot. "One after another, at half mile intervals, the Ju's crashed in flames."

The operation was led by an Australian born wing commander who holds the awards of DFC and bar. He shot down one Ju 52. The rest of the successes were shared by British, Australian and Canadian pilots. A squadron leader, an Oxford graduate, who lives near Winchester, shot down two of the transports. He said, "My most vivid impression of the action was the sight of high columns of black smoke rising from the sea, like a long colonnade, visible at least ten minutes after the engagement had been broken off."

Firing from Windows

[The German troops were firing from their guns in vain from the windows of the Ju 52's]. Of the engagement he said, "I hit two planes, I could see the face of the pilot twisted with horror as his machine plunged into the sea, the starboard wing burning. It was like shooting partridges." Two days before taking part in this battle an Australian flight lieutenant from Ross Bay, Sydney, had made a forced landing behind the enemy lines. On that occasion he was able to fly his aircraft back as he saw the enemy approaching.

Giving his account in the vernacular of the flight over the Mediterranean he said, "well, I'm quits now for that flap they gave me." He personally accounted for two Ju 52s and two Me 110s – the highest record of the day. Not until the fighters were empty of ammunition did they break off the fight. "Only three Ju's remained," said a squadron leader. "They limped off."

“They left the sea,” he said, “like a beacon, with petrol flaming in pools among which struggled the German troops.” Two Ju 52s fell to a pilot officer, the holder of the DFM, who lives at Wembley, Middlesex. These brought his total of enemy aircraft destroyed to 13.

Canada was well represented by a sergeant pilot from Bruid, Saskatchewan. He shot down two Ju 52s. Another Empire trained sergeant pilot, and Australian from Ballarat, Victoria, destroyed one.’