

MESSERSCHMITT DEFECTORS

CLOSELY ALLIED TO THE NAZIS, THE CROATIAN AIR FORCE FLEW AN INTERESTING VARIETY OF AXIS AIRCRAFT. IN THE CLOSING DAYS OF THE WAR, CROATIAN PILOTS BEGAN DEFECTING — THE SMART ONES GOING TO AMERICAN AND BRITISH BASES

BY MIRO MIRASLAV

Central Europe is steeped in centuries of blood-letting and ethnic hatred. The extremely flawed Treaty of Versailles following WWI created what historians called the “Frankenstein Monster of European States.” That country was Yugoslavia — an uneasy morass of culturally, spiritually, ethnically, and linguistically different populations that politicians attempted to weld together into a country that had the false motto of “the self-determination of peoples.”

Nearly from the start, the different populations making up the new country began killing off perceived rivals. There were a lot of targets to choose from — Croats, Serbs, Slovenes,



Croatian Air Force wings.

Bosnians, Montenegrins, Hungarians, Macedonians, Austrians, Albanians, and Germans were all blended together. Into this mess was dumped religious oppression and hatred from Orthodox Serb Christians and Muslims. The capital was Belgrade and the various factions were soon killing each other off in particularly nasty ways. Many of these groups wanted their own country,

perhaps none more so than the Croats.

The Croat contingent pretty much got their wish on 6 April 1941. On that date, the German *Wehrmacht* and *Luftwaffe* launched a massive attack on Yugoslavia. The Royal Yugoslav Air Force was mauled from the very start. That service's 3rd Bomber Regiment was destroyed on the ground by attacking Messerschmitts and *Stukas* when its commanding officer, a Croat with Nazi ties, allowed his aircraft to be parked in the open as easy targets for the invaders.

Three days prior to the full-scale invasion, Col. Vladimir Kren, another Croat, defected to Austria in a Potez

The Croats flew a wide variety of aircraft during WWII, many being cast-offs including Fiat G.50s from Italy. An initial batch of ten was received and they were utilized for anti-partisan activities in the Balkans.

Po 25 biplane. He had loaded the craft with intelligence data about the Royal Yugoslav Air Force and immediately turned the documents over to the Germans. Even before the Germans had overwhelmed Zagreb, residents of the area on 10 April 1941 proclaimed it as *Nezavisna Drava Hrvatska* — the Independent State of Croatia.

Along with the new state, the *Zrakoplovstvo Nezavisna Drava Hrvatska* (ZNDH) was also formed — the Air Force of the Independent State of Croatia. Flying a Bucker Bu 133 *Jungmeister* aerobatic trainer, Cvitan Galic, a flight instructor, landed his light biplane at an airfield that had just been claimed by rebel forces. He was surrounded by admiring rebels and cans of paint were produced so that the hated RYAF red/white/blue roundels could be painted over and replaced with the insignia of the new ZNDH. This consisted of a black clover applied over a white cross. Thus painted, Galic took off for the ZNDH's first mission — a recon flight over territory still held



by the Yugoslav army. The unarmed Bucker was not ideal for this mission. Slow and without armor protection, it quickly became a target for the Yugoslav guns but Galic, who would become an important figure in the new air force, completed his mission and returned.

After eleven days of fighting, Yugoslavia collapsed. A few pilots from the Royal Yugoslav Air Force headed to the Soviet Union or the Middle East but most stayed and joined the ZNDH, which was now under the command of Col. Kren. The first task undertaken by Kren, whose zeal appealed to the Nazis (also, the

brutality of the Croats exceeded that of the Nazis), and his fellow pilots was to locate aircraft that could be used to form the new ZNDH. Yugoslavia had been operating a few dozen Bristol Blenheim light-bombers and Hawker Hurricane fighters that had been obtained from the British. The country had also designed and manufactured its own aircraft — the



The arrival of the Bf 109G attracted lots of attention. One American serviceman took this color photo of the captured fighter wearing its Croatian markings. Note the Olive Drab/Neutral Gray and natural metal Mitchells in the background.