

# German Parachute Forces 1935-45

by Brian L. Davis

key  
uniform  
guides  
5







1. The Luftwaffe camouflage combat jacket, worn by the majority of Luftwaffe Field Division personnel and occasionally by German paratroops acting in an infantry role. 2. The ammunition bandolier in blue-grey cloth. 3. The cuff-title for wear by officers of the 1st Parachute Regiment.





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1. **Top:** German paratroopers leap from their Junkers aircraft. See page 18 for further details.  
 2. **Centre:** Reinforcements being

air-dropped over the island of Crete.  
 3. **Bottom:** German paratroopers manning an anti-tank gun in Crete.







# Historical Background

4. Above left: A paratrooper dug in with an MG42 somewhere in Italy. The soldier is wearing a loose-fitting combat jacket manufactured from Italian Army camouflage material.

5. Below left: As soon as the battle for Crete ended, the Germans sent out armed patrols to search the countryside for German survivors and Allied stragglers who had been left behind when the island was evacuated or who had been cut off in the general retreat but were still fighting on in isolated pockets. (See also plate 14.)

6. Below: A member of Police Detachment Wecke taking part in an early anti-Communist raid.



## The origins and development of the German Parachute Arm

While it had been the Russians who had first conceived the idea and developed the basic techniques for the use of parachute troops as a military weapon, it was the Germans who did much towards perfecting these techniques — raising parachute formations and building them into a formidable fighting machine. The German authorities were swift in grasping the essential concept that troops who were expected to fight in ground actions after parachuting at the end of an operational flight were neither flying infantrymen nor airmen on special duties but a new type of soldier altogether. It was because of this basic understanding as to the role of the paratrooper that the Germans were able to achieve such notable successes in the early years of the war.

The origins of the German parachute arm can be traced back to 23rd February 1933. It was on this date that Hermann Göring, in his capacity as Prussian Minister of the Interior, issued the decree founding the Police Detachment 'Wecke' (Polizeiabteilung Wecke), a unit whose main task was to combat and suppress Communist cells in the Berlin area. (See plate 6.) Under the command of Police Major Wecke, it was formed almost exclusively from officers and men drawn from the ranks of the Berlin Protection Police (Berlin Schutzpolizei); one of the main qualifications for a volunteer's selection was his being imbued with National Socialist principles. In planning the many successful raids which Wecke's unit carried out, aerial reconnaissance photographs were taken of the districts concerned by the police air section (Luftaufsicht); and when surprise was the essential element the raids were carried out by small detachments of Police Parachute troops in preference to road vehicle units. It was from these early beginnings that the German parachute arm was eventually developed.

By October 1935, when it became part of the German Air Force, Police Detachment Wecke had been considerably reorganised and expanded: its title had been changed three times; its primary function had grown; and its complement of men and weapons increased many times over. It became part of 'Regiment General Göring' and, with its incorporation into the Luftwaffe, the actual function of the unit was radically altered. Two of the three original Jäger (light) battalions (which were first created in May 1934 when the unit was known as the Land Police Group 'General Göring' — (Landespolizeigruppe 'General Göring')) were given new roles: the 3rd Jäger Battalion was converted into a light anti-aircraft detachment, and the 1st became a parachute rifle battalion. For the future German airborne arm this was a most significant development; building on the experience gained from the early police parachute operations,<sup>1</sup> but now organised on military lines, the newly-created parachute battalion provided the nucleus around which

1. The creation of this parachute rifle battalion did not represent the only interest in Germany at this time in the development of parachute troops. Experience had been gained from the 32 survivors of a group of 50 Luftwaffe volunteers who had been sent to Spain to observe and gain practical experience from operations with the Condor Legion. All possible use was made of the knowledge which these survivors brought back and, as a result of trials carried out at the experimental training section at Stendal (see footnote 2), it was decided to form an Academy for Parachutists in order to train troops for actual airborne warfare.





7 and 8. Max Schmeling, the former German heavyweight boxing champion of the world, was a volunteer in the German paratroop arm. Falsely reported killed in Crete, Schmeling survived the war and today lives in West Germany.

all future parachute units would be formed within the Luftwaffe.

On 1st April 1938 the 1st Parachute Rifle Battalion, re-designated 'IV Fallschirmschützen Batallion', was detached from its parent unit, Regiment General Göring, and posted to Stendal, the newly-formed parachute school sixty miles west of Berlin.<sup>2</sup> Here, under the command of Major Brauer, it became the 1st Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment (I Bataillon, Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 1) making up the bulk of the paratroopers at the school.

On 1st July 1938 Major-General Kurt Student took over the formation of the Airborne Forces of the Luftwaffe. Student was responsible, along with Major Bassenge, for the establishment of the 7th Airborne Division (7. Flieger-Division) during the summer of 1938, and he succeeded in infusing into his division an unusually strong fighting spirit—an élan which came to be known as the 'paratrooper spirit'.<sup>3</sup>

The 2nd Battalion of the newly-formed regiment had a rather different background. In 1936 a German Army parachute unit had been organised at Stendal, its personnel all being volunteers drawn from the regular Army. Known as the Heavy Parachute Infantry Company (Schwere-Fallschirm-Infanterie-Kompanie), it was equipped with heavy machine-guns and heavy mortars and by the autumn of 1937 was sufficiently well trained to take part in the large-scale Wehrmacht manoeuvres held in Mecklenburg. In the spring of 1938 it was reorganised and expanded to battalion strength under the guidance of Major Richard Heidrich (plate 24), who had been transferred from his post as a tactics instructor at the Potsdam War College and who subsequently became the first commander of the Army Parachute Battalion. While still under the jurisdiction of the Army, the unit took part in the occupation of the Sudetenland during the autumn of 1938, where it was temporarily under the operational control of Major-General Student.

On 4th November 1938 the 'Fallschirm-Infanterie-Batallion' moved into the newly-constructed Rosalie Kaserne in Brunswick (Braunschweig), and on the same day the Inspector of Infantry, Major-General Ott, presented the Battalion with an Army Colour, bestowing on it the traditions of the First World War 7th Assault Battalion.

The amalgamation of Army and Luftwaffe parachute battalions came about on 1st January 1939 at the insistence of Hermann Göring; the Army Parachute Infantry Battalion ('das Bataillon Heidrich') was absorbed into the Luftwaffe to become the 2nd Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment. A third battalion was added to the 1st Regiment just before the 1939 Polish campaign. 1st and 2nd Battalions were raised in time for the campaign in Scandinavia as part of the newly-formed 2nd Parachute Regiment, which was placed under the command of Major Heidrich, who had been transferred from his Army parachute battalion. Although rifle battalions and divisional

2. Commanded by Major Gerhard Bassenge, this school had developed in 1937 from an experimental section assigned to the Stendal airfield.

3. In January 1939, in addition to his post as Commander of 7th Airborne Division, Student was appointed Inspector of the Parachute and Airborne Forces (Inspekteur der Fallschirm-und Luftlandetruppen).





**9. Top:** Trainee paratroopers await their turn to board their transport aircraft for a practice air drop under winter conditions.

**10. Hauptmann Koch**, the paratroop officer who led the assault on the Belgian forts at Eben Emael. In October 1943 Koch was killed in a motoring accident. Driving at night and at high speed along a fog-bound autobahn, his car crashed into the back of an unlit stationary tank transporter: his head was severed from his body.

troops were subsequently added to the 7th Airborne Division, it was far from complete when war broke out. Only after the outstandingly successful campaign in Holland and the capture of Rotterdam, planned and led by General Student, was final approval given for its completion, a process which had been delayed by higher priorities being given to equipping other Luftwaffe units and by lack of adequate air transport.

#### Fallschirmjäger formations in action

**Poland:** German paratroops first saw action in Poland during mid-September 1939 when elements of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions from the 1st Parachute Regiment became engaged with Polish troops in a limited ground action. After the campaign the units returned to their depots in Germany.

**Narvik:** German paratroops took part in the invasion of Norway and the occupation of Denmark. Early in June 1940, in company strength and commanded by Oberleutnant Fritz Becker, they were air-dropped into Narvik in support of attacking Mountain Infantry (Gebirgsjäger) troops.

**Holland:** The 1st Parachute Regiment was fully committed during the invasion of the Netherlands, seizing bridges and airfields, and holding strategic points in the van of the German advance. The regiment overran the Hague and with the support of other units — including the 22nd Air Landing Division (22. Luftlande-Division) — took Rotterdam.

**Eben Emael:** The attack into Belgium and across the Low Countries was spearheaded by a brilliantly daring operation mounted by a small force from Assault Unit 'Koch' — (Sturmabteilung 'Koch'). Hauptmann Koch (plate 10) led the men of his assault unit in the attack on the Belgian fort of Eben Emael, reputed to be the strongest fort in the world, and on the vital bridges over the Albert Canal. In the early hours of the morning of 11th May 1940 the Parachute Engineer Unit (Fallschirm-Pioniere Abteilung), commanded by Oberleutnant Rudolf Witzig, landed by glider on top of the forts. Blasting their way with satchel charges through the nine forts of the Eben Emael complex, they achieved their object at the cost of only 6 dead and 15 wounded. At the same time as this attack on the forts was taking place, men of the 1st Company from the 1st Parachute Regiment parachuted down and attacked the three vital bridges at Vroenhoven, Veldwezelt and Kanne. By mid-morning on 11th May, with the forts destroyed and two of the three bridges intact and firmly in German hands, the way was open across the Albert Canal for the German armoured dash through Belgium to the coast — an advance which was to take just eighteen days.

**Greece:** Following the fall of France, the next parachute operation took place in Greece. The bridge of the Corinth Canal was a vital point on the withdrawal route for the retreating British, Australian and Greek forces and its capture was pinpointed as an effective block on the evacuation of these troops from Greece. Paratroops from the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 2nd Parachute Regiment, together with an airborne pioneer detachment, succeeded just before dawn on 26th April 1941 in capturing this vital bridge intact. Landing at both ends of the bridge by glider and parachute, the Germans rushed their objective and captured it along with a sizeable number of its



defenders. The British had laid demolition charges for just such a surprise attack but the fuzes on these were cut by the pioneers from the German parachute engineer detachment. Moments later, and without warning, the bridge suddenly erupted, the charges probably having been set off by rifle fire. Many of the German paratroopers as well as the British defenders perished in this unexpected explosion. (See plates 11, 12.)

**The Battle for Crete (plates 3, 42):** The battle for Crete, an island so small and yet so strategically important, was waged over the twelve days following 19th May 1941. It proved to be the greatest airborne offensive mounted by the Germans during the Second World War; and, with every available parachute formation committed to the assault, it also proved to be a very costly venture in terms of both men and materials.

By the end of April 1941 practically all the British forces had been evacuated from Southern Greece, and on the 30th of that month General Freyberg was appointed by Wavell to command the defending forces on Crete, comprising British, Australian, New Zealand, Maori and Greek troops with the added bonus of the active co-operation of the island's population. On 16th May the final British reinforcements arrived and two days later General Freyberg ordered the last airworthy aircraft to be flown out—leaving the island garrison stripped of air power.

Operation 'Merkur' (Mercury), the German attack on Crete, opened on 19th May 1941: waves of German bombers swept in across the sea from temporary airfields in Greece to attack Canea, the island's chief port and capital, Suda Bay and Heraklion (Candia)—the key points on the island. Stukas from the VIII Flying Corps (VIII Flieger-Korps) meanwhile carried out intensive bombing and strafing. The first German airborne landings were made during the early hours of the following day. In an attempt to take the most important points on the island with two swift airborne assaults, the paratroops under the overall command of Luftwaffe Fliegerkorps XI first attacked in two waves at daybreak. 'Group West', made up of men from General Meindl's Air Landing Assault Regiment (Luftlande-Sturm-Regiment), attacked the airfield at Máleme while 'Group Centre', consisting of the troops of the 3rd Parachute Regiment and commanded by Oberst Heydrich, attacked Canea and the port at Suda Bay. During the afternoon of the same day more landings—the second assault—were effected, this time against the airfield and town of Retimo; these were carried out by the 2nd Parachute Regiment, commanded by Oberst Sturm. Further attacks, carried out mainly by the 1st Parachute Regiment commanded by Oberst Bräuer, were made at the same time on the town and airfield of Heraklion, the objective of 'Group East'. By nightfall of the first day some 3000 German paratroops had been landed but none of their objectives had been fully secured.

At 04.30 hours on the morning of 21st May the airborne attacks recommenced and that night the Germans attempted landings by sea, suffering losses at the hands of the Royal Navy. Further landings from the sea were repulsed the next day.

The German attacking forces inflicted heavy losses on the Allied troops, who were subjected to almost uninterrupted dive-bombing attacks, but they in turn suffered high losses in







11 and 12. Left: The road bridge over the Corinth Canal—the vital link with southern Greece. 11. Before its destruction. 12. At the moment of the explosion.

13. Above. The battle for Crete lasted just twelve days, from 19th May to 30th May 1941.

14. Below left: Members of a paratroop patrol pause for a photograph.

15. Below right: At the completion of the battle for Crete, awards were presented to deserving survivors.







16 and 17. Above: Paratroopers serving as infantry on the Eastern Front.

men and troop-carrying aircraft. The fighting was both ferocious and savage, with battles being fought back and forth over the same ground, and there were some places which changed hands time and again. The critical moment came in the afternoon of 21st May when men of the Parachute Assault Regiment managed to secure the airfield at Máleme, some ten miles south-west of Canea. British counterattacks failed to dislodge the paratroops who, having gained this all-important foothold, expanded it and swiftly made use of the airfield to fly in the main body of the German airborne forces.

On 24th May General Ringel, overall commander of the German forces in Crete, organised his forces for the main land offensive. Attacks were concentrated against Canea and Suda Bay and on the following day a penetration of the British positions was made. On the next day another attack enlarged this penetration, compelling the British forces to withdraw. On 28th May German mountain troops of the 5th Mountain Division (5. Gebirgsjäger-Division), who had been landed by air at Máleme, finally broke down the stubborn resistance of the British forces. With Canea in their hands (captured on the previous day) the Germans were able to bring fire to bear on Suda Bay itself and this key port soon fell.

On May 29th it was announced by British G.H.Q. that 'in face of further attacks by German Forces which have been heavily reinforced, our troops have withdrawn to positions east of Suda Bay.' Evacuation of the surviving Allied forces was just two days away. A British rearguard fought the last action north of the White Mountains; Heraklion was evacuated; and by 30th May, when the Retimo garrison was forced to surrender to the Germans, the evacuation had started from Sfakia on the south coast of the island with the British rearguard barely holding off the pursuing Axis forces. 31st May saw the final British evacuation from Sfakia to Egypt.

18. Right: Bernhard Ramcke.





The terrible battle for Crete was at an end. Kurt Student spoke of the operation as 'the graveyard of the German airborne forces': of the 22,000 German troops committed over 7000 were killed or wounded in action. One in every four paratroopers dropped on the island perished and, owing to the devastating losses of troop-carrying aircraft, those men that did survive the battle for Crete were soon to be wasted as ground infantry during the fighting in Russia.

**Eastern Front:** With the heavy toll in men and equipment inflicted on the German parachute forces during the battle for Crete, it was some time before they were in a position to undertake any further operations. Replacements were steadily drafted into their depleted ranks and in September 1941 the first unit of paratroopers—the 2nd Battalion of the Air Landing Assault Regiment—was transferred to the Eastern Front. Serving as assault infantry, they fought in conventional ground actions on the Leningrad front, along the River Neva. (See plates 16, 17.) At the end of September the paratroops of the 2nd Battalion were reinforced by the 1st and 3rd Paratroop Regiments and practically all the service units from the 7th Airborne Division (Flieger [Fallschirm] Division 7). Caught up in the continuous fighting, these units were not relieved until the summer of 1942.

In October 1942, whilst fighting on the Smolensk Front, 7th Airborne Division was renamed 1st Parachute Division (1.Fallschirm-Division) and plans were put in hand to raise a second airborne division. This came about early in 1943. Raised and located in southern France, the new division was sent to fight on the Ukrainian Front in the autumn of 1943; it took part in the general retreat of the German Army, being used to cover the withdrawal with innumerable rearguard actions. In the spring of 1944 it was rushed to Normandy to counter the Allied landings on the mainland of Europe, but individual paratroop regiments and combat groups continued to see a limited action on the Eastern Front for the remainder of the war.

**North Africa:** Parachute Brigade 'Ramcke' (Fallschirm-Brigade-Ramcke) with three rifle regiments and supporting units were flown to Tobruk during August 1942 to help reinforce Rommel's drive on Cairo. On arrival Ramcke (plate 18) found that his specialist unit, far from being used to attack the Suez Canal, had to be deployed instead as infantry on the southern end of Rommel's line of defence facing the British Eighth Army at El Alamein. In the desperate retreat that followed the Battle of Alamein in October 1942 the German staff ordered parachute Brigade 'Ramcke' to withdraw to the west; but since they were known to be without troop transport or fuel this was tantamount to writing them off. The march westwards began on foot but it was not long before the 600 resourceful survivors succeeded in capturing intact a British transport column complete with food, water, fuel and equipment; thus they were able to regain contact with the main German forces at Fuka. For this exploit Bernhard Ramcke received the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross.

**Tunis:** German parachute formations were thrown into the last desperate battle in the North African campaign when in November 1942 the remains of the Afrika Korps were reinforced by various units flown into the Tunisian enclave. Among



them were Regiment Barenthin, a composite regiment led by Oberst Walther Barenthin, and made up of men drafted from the airborne forces; the 5th Parachute Regiment (Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 5), commanded by Oberstleutnant Koch and built around the surviving officers and NCOs of General Meindl's 'Luftlande-Sturm-Regiment'; two battalions from 'Fallschirmjäger-Regiment Hermann Göring'; and 'Pioniere-Bataillon 21' led by Major Witzig. During this Tunisian campaign German and British paratroops fighting as infantry faced each other for the first time in the war as heavy fighting took place around Medjez-el-Bab (plate 19) and Tebourba. The outcome of these battles was inevitable and the paratroopers made their last stand on the Miliane river on 7th May 1943. Ramcke, Koch, Witzig and other senior paratroop officers were withdrawn to Germany in time to avoid capture, but many survivors who could not be evacuated became prisoners of war.

**Sicily:** Paratroops retreating from Tunis were pulled back to Sicily and reinforced by the 3rd Parachute Regiment flown in from Rome. Here they took part in the attempt to counter the Allied invasion. After many days of stubborn fighting, Field Marshal Kesselring ordered the withdrawal of Axis forces from Sicily across the straits of Messina to the Italian Mainland. During the night of 17th August 1943 the paratroops were pulled out.

**Italy:** Within two weeks of their withdrawal from Sicily German paratroops from the 3rd and 4th Regiments were engaged on the Italian mainland in stemming the Anglo-American invasion at Salerno. When the Allies finally broke out of their bridgehead, the Germans fell back across the Plain of Naples and formed a defensive line along the river Volturno. With the downfall of Mussolini, the formation of the Badoglio government and the capitulation of almost all the Italian forces, fresh German parachute formations — Fliegerkorps XI and 2. Fallschirm-Division — were flown into Rome from southern France. Their task was to keep open the German lines of supply and to carry out attacks on Italian military installations that posed a threat to the German forces. At the end of December 1943 Fliegerkorps XI and 2. Fallschirm-Division were transferred from Italy to the Eastern Front. The headquarters of the newly formed 1. Fallschirm-Korps took over from Fliegerkorps XI and the future 4. Fallschirm-Division began to be formed around the cadre left behind by the departing 2nd Parachute Division.

**Cassino:** Having fought their way inland from the south Italian beaches of Salerno, Reggio and Taranto by the autumn of 1943, the Allied armies were ready to launch their first determined attempt to break through the Gustav Line, the German defensive system which stretched across Italy from the Adriatic to the Tyrrhenian Sea. Having once breached the Axis positions they intended to join up with a projected landing force to the north at Anzio and press on to take Rome.

The town of Cassino was situated in a valley at the foot of Mount Cassino — a massive rock on which was perched, 1800 feet above sea level, the 415-year-old Benedictine monastery. Cassino was strategically placed and well adapted for defence: and beyond it, a short 70 miles along the Via Casilina, lay Rome.



19. Above. The cemetery at Medjez-el-Bab contains the remains of many of the German paratroopers who fell during the Tunisian fighting. A visitor to this cemetery today would find the original wooden hand-painted head-boards replaced by more permanent crosses cast from concrete and whitewashed.



The first attempt by the Allies to take Cassino by a flanking movement combined with a frontal assault failed and the general opinion amongst those on the spot seems to have been that the occupation by the enemy of the monastery as an observation post was largely responsible for this failure. Based on this assumption — and after prolonged deliberation and much discussion — it was decided to bomb the monastery. (See plate 20.) On 15th February 1944, 142 B-17 Flying Fortress bombers dropped over 350 tons of high explosives and incendiary bombs. Much of the monastery was blown to bits: but the bombs had little if any effect on its value to the defenders and the battle increased in intensity as the stubborn German paratroopers refused to be driven from the Cassino heights. As long as they held those heights no Allied attacks against the town of Cassino itself could hope to succeed.

A month after the monastery was destroyed the weight of the Allied air power was turned against the town and on 15th March in a continuous four-hour bombing operation the town of Cassino was flattened. Practically every unit of Allied air power in the Mediterranean area was concentrated in the greatest air attack ever delivered against so small a target. The bombing, intended to reduce the German strongpoints to rubble, was followed by a terrific artillery barrage: massed British and US artillery attempted to complete the destruction of the ancient stone buildings, which still concealed and protected enemy gun emplacements. After all this the infantry went forward to the assault.

But the destruction of the town caused the attackers more

20. Below left: The 83-year-old abbot of the Cassino monastery is moved to safety by General der Panzertruppen von Senger und Etterlin before the battle of Monte Cassino starts.

21. Below right: German paratroopers captured by New Zealanders at Cassino.





trouble than the defenders: every single foot of ground was contested with savage ferocity. As the infantry advanced the paratroopers and machine-gunners sprang to life; from caves and tunnels in the hillside the tenacious German paratroopers emerged; and from cellars of houses in front of and behind the advancing infantry they harassed the Allied attack. Three-quarters or more of Cassino was eventually cleared and then -- with the impetus of the Allied attack partly lost -- the Germans began to counterattack.

Actions like this were typical of the dogged resistance and skill in concealment shown by the 1. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment in particular (and other German troops in general) at Cassino. The paratroops proved to be superb street fighting specialists.

There were four great battles for control of Cassino: New Zealanders, Indians, Gurkas, Maories, Poles, Canadians and British infantry in turn were all repulsed, time and time again. Allied artillery and aircraft shelled, bombed and strafed the ruins of the town and monastery in an effort to destroy the German defences; yet still the Germans held on and, incredibly, fought back. Not until May 1944 did the Allies finally succeed in turning the flanks of the Cassino position. On the night of 17/18th May, with the French 25 miles behind their positions, Kesselring ordered his paratroops to pull back. The British finally took the town of Cassino; the hill and all that remained of the monastery fell to the Poles on 18th May 1944.

**Warsaw:** With the Allied landings in southern France the relative importance of the Italian front began to diminish and Hitler ordered Kesselring to send reinforcements to France and Poland. Among the German units moved to Poland was Fallschirm-Panzer-Division 'Hermann Göring' (Paratroop-Armoured-Division Hermann Göring). Transferred from Italy to Warsaw under very difficult conditions, they helped to prevent the Russian breakthrough in the Warsaw area. They took part in the fighting for the Polish capital and helped to destroy the Polish Home Army, the underground forces commanded by General Bor-Komorowski. In the desperately heavy fighting that followed, Fallschirm-Panzer-Division 'Hermann Göring' was eventually almost totally destroyed by the Russians.

**Normandy, Arnhem and the last months of the war:** The 3rd and 5th Parachute Divisions were heavily engaged during the Normandy fighting in an attempt to stem the Allied landings and subsequent advances inland. 3. Fallschirmjäger-Division was moved from Brest to take up positions around St. Lo; 5. Fallschirmjäger-Division took part in the battles around Caen; and 2. Fallschirmjäger-Division was also withdrawn from the Eastern Front to garrison the fortifications at Brest under the command of General Ramcke. Here it held out against the Americans before being compelled to surrender on 20th April 1945. Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6 meanwhile fought the American 101st and 82nd Airborne paratroops dropped at the start of the invasion.

The First Parachute Army had been formed on 4th September 1944 from Luftwaffe air crews, ground staff and convalescent paratroopers -- a total of 30,000 men. This army now closed the gap in the German dispositions in northern Belgium by holding the line of the Albert Canal from Antwerp to Maastricht, a front of 60 miles. At the time of the Arnhem



22. Top left: With the overthrow of Mussolini, the capitulation of the Italian armed forces and the establishment of the Badoglio government—all of which represented a very real threat to German military operations in Italy—German paratroopers were rushed in strength to occupy Rome and keep open the supply routes to the German units fighting south of the capital.

23. Top right: General der Flieger Student presenting decorations to paratroops after the fighting at Cassino.





24. Below left: *Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring (foreground) with Generalleutnant Heidrich.*

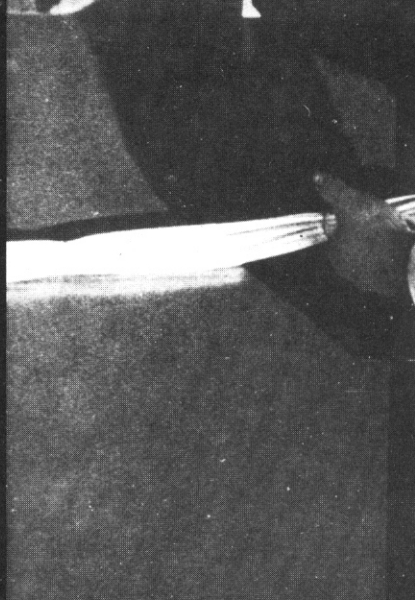
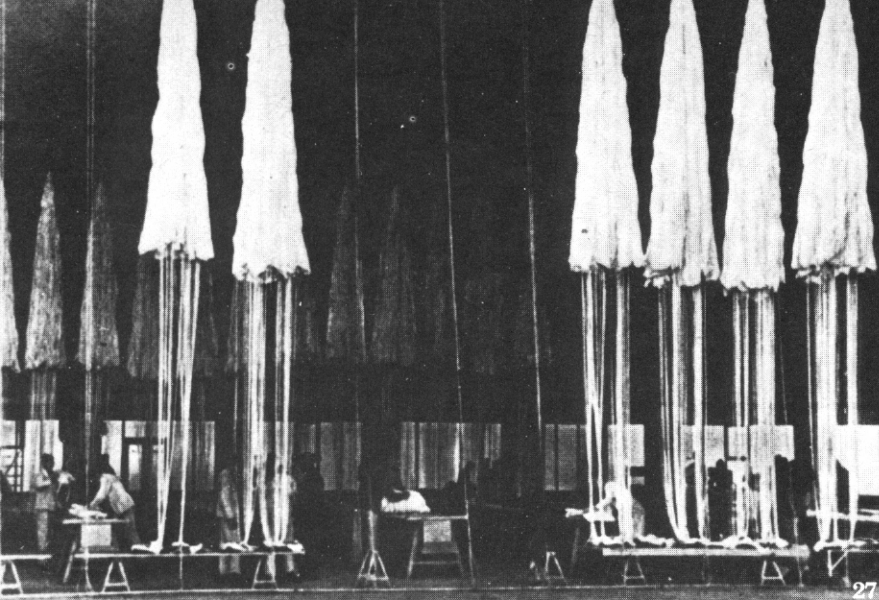
25. Below centre: *Paratroopers look up as Allied aircraft sweep across the Normandy skies.*

26. Below right: *An anti-tank gun, camouflaged with gorse, is moved into a new position during an anti-invasion exercise carried out in Normandy.*

battle in September 1944 Student's 1.Fallschirm-Armee was holding the line of the Meuse-Escaut Canal. It was reinforced by 6. Fallschirmjäger-Division sent from Cologne as well as Army and Waffen-SS units, and was preparing to fall back from Holland and defend the north German ports and naval bases at the time that the war in Europe ended.

German paratroop units took part in the Ardennes offensive, acting as spearhead troops for the attacking forces. A division raised to replace the 2nd Division lost at Brest and the 6th, 7th and 8th Parachute Divisions ceased to function in May 1945. They had fought with distinction in the defensive actions along the Rhineland and in the Reichswald forest. 9. Fallschirmjäger-Division, raised in Italy, fought in eastern Austria and was finally destroyed in Czechoslovakia in early May 1945.



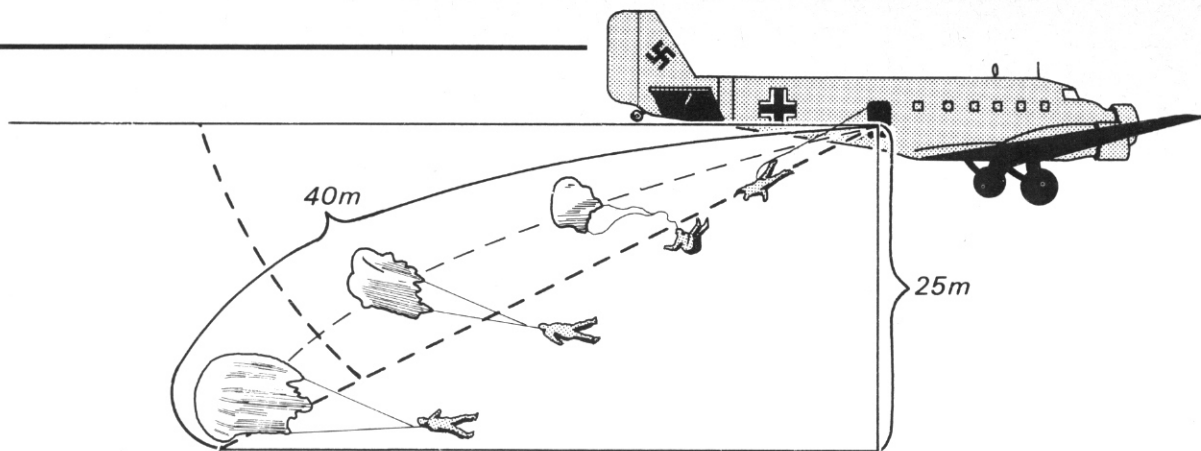


*27-35. The stages involved in packing a parachute. One of the first training requirements for a paratroop recruit was to become thoroughly acquainted with his equipment. In contrast to the British airborne forces, who relied on skilled members of the special teams of W.R.A.F. parachute packers, Fallschirmjäger were responsible for packing their own parachutes. They were permitted to choose anyone from among their number to assist them in this task; but until a recruit became fully confident, it usually fell to the NCO instructor to help out.*









### German Parachuting Techniques

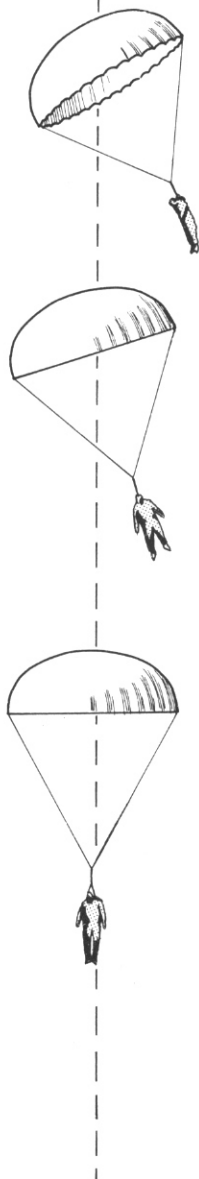
Suspended from his parachute by two straps attached to the back of his harness, the German paratrooper had very little control over his movements when in flight — whereas the parachute harness designed by Sir Raymond Quilter and used by British Airborne troops had four shroud lines giving the Allied soldier a fairly wide degree of flight control. The German soldier, however, could only swivel around on the end of his harness without the means to control his descent or his point of contact with the ground.

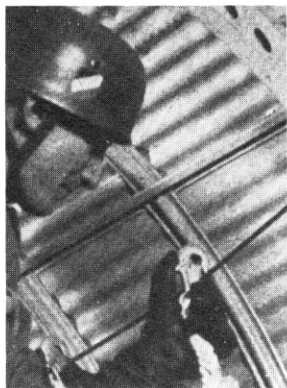
Inside the aircraft the German paratrooper clipped his static line to the anchor line (plates 36, 37) and, when his turn to jump came, positioned himself in the open doorway of the transport aircraft, placing his feet wide apart on the ledge of the doorway and gripping the hand rails on either side of the opening (plate 38). He launched himself out into space by pushing against the hand rails and springing forward in one swift movement. A special technique was adopted: the 'spreadeagled' position (similar to the present day free fall descent posture) reduced the shock imparted by the sudden opening of the parachute canopy.

The parachutist fell from the aircraft in an arc, the vertical height of which under normal air conditions was about 25 metres (82 feet), before the parachute canopy unfolded completely. Once oscillation ceased the parachutist floated steadily down, suspended from his fully opened parachute. The actual rate of fall was higher than it appeared, reaching 4 to 6 metres (12 to 19 feet) per second according to the weight of the soldier.

A great deal of attention was paid during training exercises to mastering the technique of accurate landing — allowing for drift — which was of paramount importance. The object was to place the troops as close as possible to the points to be attacked since every yard further from the target was ground that had to be crossed under fire. Speed was an essential factor and one of the important elements in the deployment of airborne forces.

Just before actually landing the German paratrooper always attempted to twist his body to face down-wind so that he was thrown forward on to his hands and knees (plate 40). Although this was then considered the safest method of contact with the ground it still resulted in a fairly high casualty rate amongst German paratroopers from injuries to wrists and knees.

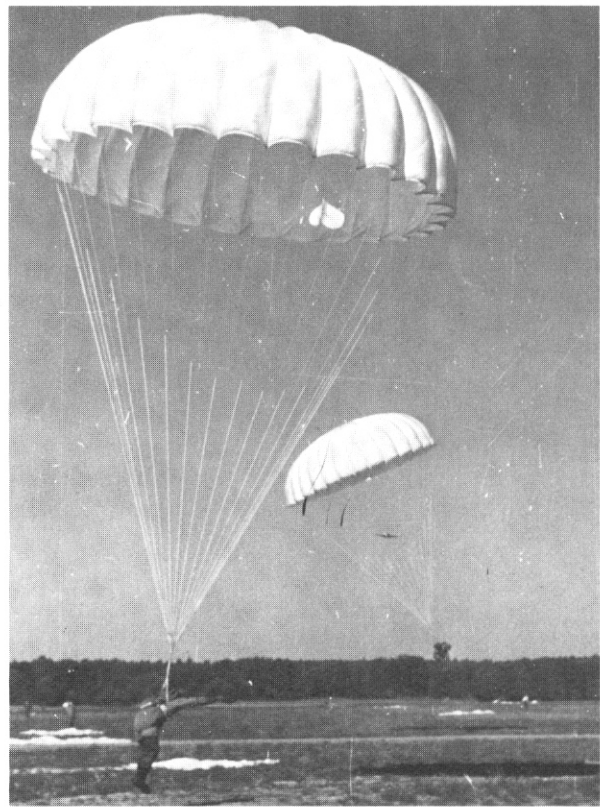
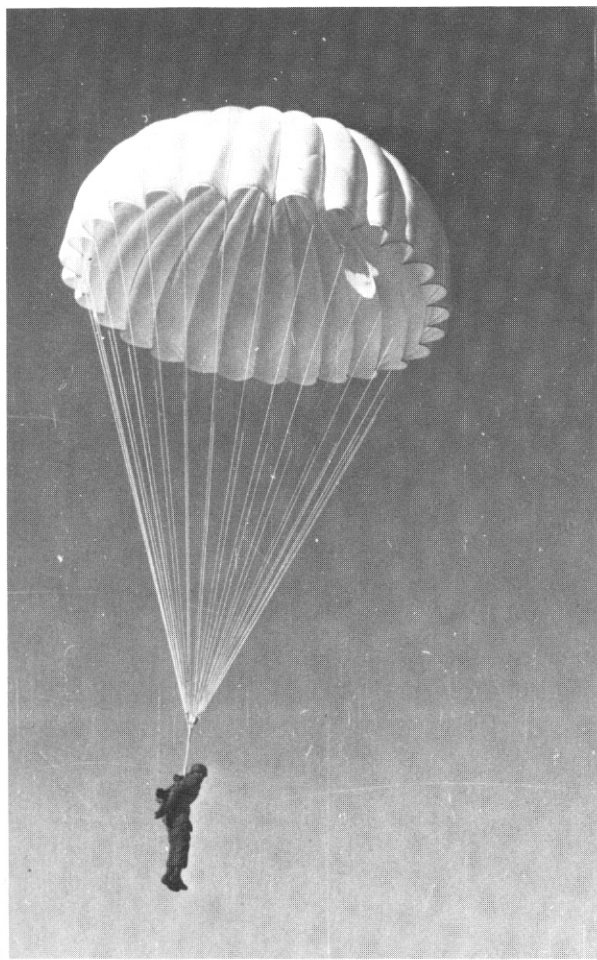




**36. Above left:** Troops about to board their aircraft. The end of the parachute static line was gripped firmly between the teeth, leaving both hands free for climbing into the plane.

**37. Above centre:** When the command "Make ready" was given, each Fallschirmjäger stood up and hooked his static line to the plane's anchor line, taking up his position ready to jump.

**38. Right:** The correct jump-off position, demonstrated here by Max Schmeling.







41



42



43



44



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48



49

# Uniforms

The uniforms, special clothing and equipment used by Germany's parachute forces can be divided into two basic groups:

1. The uniforms, complete with headdress and footwear that were the standard issue Luftwaffe items for wear by all ranks of the parachute arm.<sup>4</sup>
2. The special clothing and equipment that was designed and issued for wear by all Fallschirmtruppen, both for training and combat use.

## Standard issue Luftwaffe clothing for use by Fallschirmtruppen.

Depending on the wearer's rank the following items of clothing—all of Luftwaffe pattern—were standard issue to Fallschirmjäger personnel:<sup>5</sup> Service Tunic (Tuchrock); Flying Service Blouse (Fliegerbluse); Uniform Tunic (Waffenrock); Officer's Summer Tunic (Sommerrock); General's Undress Tunic (Kleiner Rock); Officer's/General's Full Evening Dress (Grosse Gesellschaftsanzug); Officer's/General's Informal Evening Dress (Kleiner Gesellschaftsanzug); Greatcoat (Mantel); Officer's Cloak (Umhang); Trousers (Beinkleider); Breeches (Stiefelhosen); Peaked Cap (Schirmmütze); Flying Cap (Fliegermütze); Summer Cap (Sommermütze); Shoes (Halbschuhe); Marching Boots (Marschstiefel); Sports Kit (Sportkleidung); Fatigue Clothing (Arbeitsanzug).

## The Fallschirmjäger steel helmet.

The Luftwaffe Fallschirmjäger helmet, when first introduced, represented a new and revolutionary development in military protective headwear.

Its shape and construction was especially designed to meet the needs of the German paratrooper bearing in mind his unique role: the helmet provided the wearer to a certain extent with protection against head wounds from shrapnel and gunfire; it was designed and manufactured to resist the hard blows that were sometimes encountered during a difficult landing from an air drop; at the same time it was so shaped as to prevent any part of the helmet from becoming fouled with rigging or parachute harness lines.<sup>6</sup>

Not only was the overall shape of the Fallschirmjäger steel helmet different from that of either the M1935 or M1943 pattern steel helmets (as used by other German troops including Luftwaffe personnel) but the inner liner was also completely different. This consisted of a dome-shaped piece of leather pierced with a number of circular ventilation holes (plate 41); it was held in position inside the steel shell of the helmet by a band of strong but flexible aluminium, backed with resilient rubber padding and fixed to the shell by four special screws. These screws also served as a means by which the special neck

4. The Fallschirmjäger steel helmet, designed especially for members of the German parachute forces with particular regard to the role they had to undertake, was the one item of special clothing which was also used as part of their normal Luftwaffe uniform dress.

5. Certain items were purchased by officers, who were responsible for their own clothing; however, some items of dress clothing would not necessarily have been purchased or worn during the war years.

6. The British Airborne steel helmet was based on the design of this type of protective helmet; see Key Uniform Guide 2, *British Parachute Forces, 1940-45*.



and chin straps were anchored to the helmet at the rear and sides. (See plates 42, 16, 17, 68.)

#### **Fallschirmjäger steel helmet camouflage cloth covers**

A distinctive cloth cover of regulation pattern was officially issued and often worn with the Fallschirmjäger steel helmet. It was normally manufactured from the same coloured material as the wearer's camouflage smock (plate 43)<sup>7</sup> and was of a fairly simple non-reversible construction. It was manufactured in four panels, each cut from a single thickness of printed camouflage material, with the addition of an oval shaped piece of material forming the crown. Some patterns of cloth covers had four simple wire hooks stitched to the lower end of each of the seams between these four panels; other covers had six wire hooks. The cover was fitted tightly over the body of the helmet and attached to it by the wire hooks which fastened under the helmet rim. (See plates 69, 44.)<sup>8</sup> A strip of thin hessian cloth was stitched around the body of the helmet cover forming a series of loops, usually six or more (plate 44), and two more narrow strips were positioned on the crown in a cross shape (plate 45). These fixtures were intended to hold additional camouflage material, such as grass or twigs, to further disrupt the overall shape of the helmet.



**50. Above:** *A semi-official cloth helmet cover.*

#### **Fallschirmjäger steel helmet camouflage and colouring**

Early versions were painted both inside and outside with a rust preventative matt blue-grey paint.<sup>9</sup> On the right side of the helmet 3mm below the screw anchoring the chin strap to the helmet shell was displayed the German national colours in diagonal bars of black over white over red in the shape of a shield (See plates 7,8). In the corresponding position on the left side of the helmet was the silver-grey Luftwaffe version of the eagle and swastika national emblem, the eagle facing towards the front of the helmet (plates 43, 45, 8, 56).<sup>10</sup>

#### **Opposite page:**

**51. Above:** *The second pattern (Luftwaffe) Fallschirmjäger jump smock in green splinter-pattern camouflage.*

**52. Below:** *The same pattern smock in tan water-pattern camouflage.*

7. Initially the first pattern of official issue Fallschirmjäger helmet covers were manufactured from plain grey-green material (plate 14), but these were rapidly supplemented by the universally-issued green splinter-pattern camouflage material (plate 5). Helmet covers are known to have been manufactured in both Italian Army camouflage material and plain white material.

8. Other camouflage cloth covers existed, most being very similar in appearance to the official issue; however, in place of the four or six attachment hooks the lower edge to these other covers were manufactured with a draw string which allowed the lower edge of the cover to be drawn together under the helmet rim and tied in position. (See plates 50, 64.)

9. As the war progressed and Fallschirmjäger troops were increasingly engaged in a combat role as conventional infantry, both on the Eastern front and in Europe, helmets began to be painted dark grey-green, a more practical colour than the original blue-grey. Fallschirmjäger helmets used in North Africa, Sicily, Italy and other countries with a hot dry climate were usually over-painted in a sandy-buff colour; sometimes sand was thrown over the still wet paint and this, when dry, gave a good non-reflective surface. For service in snow-covered terrain it was necessary to have a matt-white helmet finish, which was very simply achieved by painting the steel helmet with a thick coating of whitewash. This was used instead of white paint so that when the spring came and the snow disappeared the white could be scrubbed off in water and the helmet restored to its original colour.

10. These National Colours were ordered to be removed from the Fallschirmjäger steel helmet at a fairly early stage in the war and the National Emblem was omitted from newly manufactured helmets.

Besides the standard issue Fallschirmjäger cloth helmet cover other methods of camouflaging the steel helmet were employed either on a unit basis or by individuals. Helmet covers were not worn during the German paratroops' earlier campaigns, when a crude form of disruptive camouflage was achieved merely by applying mud to the helmet's surface. This need to disrupt the smooth painted finish was responsible for bringing about the introduction of the official pattern helmet covers, especially as parachute formations became more widely used as conventional infantry.

The methods of unofficial helmet coverings for the Fallschirmjäger helmet were by no means as varied as those employed on the German Army steel helmet<sup>11</sup>; German paratroops generally tended to use netting, wire, or painted camouflage patterns. (See plates 47, 48, 49.)

### The Fallschirmjäger jump smocks.

To avoid all possibility of a paratrooper's equipment or clothing becoming entangled in his parachute harness or being caught up on any projecting part of an aircraft's interior, a specially manufactured jump jacket or smock was designed to be worn over all forms of dress and equipment. Three distinct patterns of smocks were used by German parachute units, with a number of variations being based on two of these patterns. Although very similar in general appearance, the two Luftwaffe models differed basically in that the first pattern was a step-in type garment whilst the latter buttoned down the entire length of the front of the smock. The early type of jump smock introduced by the German Army for use by its own parachute force, however, was a garment quite different from the two subsequent Luftwaffe models.

*The German Army parachute smock:* Manufactured from pale grey-green cotton drill material and slightly shorter in length than the later Luftwaffe models, the most noticeable feature of this garment was the use of two very long metal zips which ran the full length of the front of the garment from either side of the throat to the lower edge of the smock. There was no collar and the zips each had a short leather toggle; to prevent accidental opening of them a cloth flap fastened with a press-stud was positioned across each zip just below the collar. Although this item was originally intended as an experimental garment, existing stocks of the Army smock continued to be used by paratroops even after the Army's parachute unit had been absorbed into the Luftwaffe formations. However, no further supplies were manufactured after this amalgamation.

*The first pattern Luftwaffe parachute smock:* The first basic pattern Luftwaffe jump smock, which was manufactured in both pale green and grey cotton, was of the step-in variety: when putting on the smock the wearer had to step into the short legs of the garment, pull the smock up over his body, push his arms into the sleeves and shrug the jacket on to his shoulders — an action similar to putting on a boiler suit. The smock was then buttoned up the front from the crotch to the



<sup>11</sup> See Davis, B.L., *German Army Uniforms and Insignia, 1933-1945*, p.109.



collar. This model of step-in smock had one definite disadvantage, however. In order to relieve himself a soldier had to let down the garment and this entailed first removing all his equipment — an operation which in battle was time-consuming and very risky. The later pattern of smock, which unbuttoned down the whole length of the front of the garment and obviated the need to remove equipment, proved a much more practicable item of apparel.

The first pattern jump smock varied in appearance according to the number and position of the pockets and also in colour, being manufactured in both pale green and grey cotton; although superseded, it was used as late in the war as the 1942/3 campaign in North Africa and Tunis. (See plates 23, 8, 14, 5, 7.)

*The second pattern Luftwaffe parachute smock:* The second Luftwaffe pattern was originally manufactured in green splinter-pattern camouflage material, but later in the war it was produced in a tan water-pattern camouflage finish, the new design providing a distinct improvement on the earlier model (plate 52). The green splinter-pattern smocks were first introduced in time for issue to troops taking part in the Dutch campaign and the attack on Rotterdam; the tan water-pattern version was brought out shortly after the battle for Crete.

In addition to unbuttoning down the entire front of the garment there were two large zip-fastened pockets set into the smock at an angle high up on either side of the chest near to the shoulders. Two thigh pockets were positioned horizontally across the front of each leg to the garment and these were also zip-fastened, all four pockets being concealed by means of 'letter box' flaps which lay over the pocket openings. (See plates 21, 51.) A number of this particular pattern were manufactured with a special built-in holster: positioned on the right hip at the rear of the smock the pocket consisted of a small bag to hold the end of the pistol barrel and a larger one to hold the butt. The pistol was held in position by a short cloth flap, an extension of the butt bag, which threaded under a loop of cloth and was fastened by means of two press-studs.

*Insignia worn on the parachute jump smock:* The Luftwaffe national emblem was worn over the right breast of the Luftwaffe jump smock. (On the early Army pattern smocks the German Army version of the national emblem was used for only a limited period.) Luftwaffe rank insignia devised for use on air crews' flight clothing was used to indicate rank on these paratroop garments and was worn on both upper arms (plate 66). Photographic evidence indicates that campaign cuff-titles (see the section on 'Fallschirmjäger Insignia') were worn on jump smocks (plate 66); but the wearing of other forms of insignia, decorations or awards was not generally permitted.

#### **Fallschirmjäger clothing manufactured from Italian Army camouflage material.**

Large stocks of unused Italian Army camouflage material were taken over by the Germans. This material, which had a camouflage design of bold dark green patterning on a pale green base, was utilised to make a variety of combat garments for use



53. Above: An anti-tank gun, manned by paratroopers, covering a street in Rome.







54. Below: The Fallschirmjäger parade uniform. Men who had distinguished themselves during the fighting at Cassino were presented with awards for valour by Reichsmarschall Göring at a special ceremony held in Berlin on 4th May 1944.



by German troops—including Fallschirmjäger units. (See plate 4.)

#### Special grey-green Fallschirmjäger combat trousers.

In addition to the normal issue of blue-grey Luftwaffe trousers German paratroops were issued with a special pair of grey-green combat trousers. They were full-length trousers worn gathered in at the ankles and tied with tapes, the ends of the trouser legs being tucked into the tops of the jump boots (plate 15). At about knee-level along the outer seam of each leg was a concealed opening, fastened by three press-studs. These slits were designed to allow the paratrooper to reach into the trouser legs and unfasten his knee protectors and they were large enough to permit the protectors to be withdrawn through them. Immediately behind the opening on the right leg was a pocket designed to carry the Fallschirmjäger gravity blade knife. It had a narrow pocket flap which was fastened by smooth-finished grey-green press-stud buttons. There were also two side pockets, two hip pockets and a small fob pocket, the latter set near the waistband on the right side of the trouser front (plate 15).

#### Fallschirmjäger parade uniform.

To emphasise the special role played by the new German paratroop arm it was decided to adopt as a parade uniform (but not as a dress or walking-out uniform) a modified version of the combat clothing and parachute harness normally worn by Fallschirmtruppen for training and active service. This decision meant that paratroop forces for the purpose of guards, special parades and similar functions broke away from the accepted German practice of wearing a special dress uniform—the Waffenrock—for these occasions.

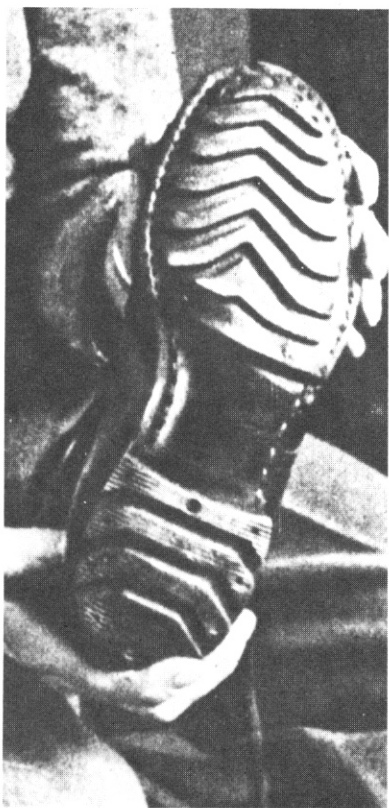
The parachute jump smock was worn over the Luftwaffe white shirt with its black tie (normal parade wear for Luftwaffe and Fallschirmjäger personnel). Also worn as part of this parade uniform were the special grey-green combat trousers, the Fallschirmjäger steel helmet and, in place of the paratroop jump boots, normal issue black leather marching boots. Their leather soles and heels with hobs combined to create a more military impression than did the rubber-soled jump boots. During cold weather the Luftwaffe Fliegerbluse (regulation issue to Fallschirmjäger) could be worn under the jump smock—greatcoats were never worn over the Fallschirmjäger parade uniform, even during wet or cold weather.

Worn as an integral part of this special parade uniform was a simplified version of the normal parachute harness. This appeared, from the front, to be identical to the parachute harness as used for air drops (plates 7, 58) but in fact there was no parachute pack attached to the back. The modified parade harness varied according to the pattern of harness used for actual service at any one time. The parade uniform was completed by black leather gauntlet-type gloves. (See plate 54.)

#### The Luftwaffe/Fallschirmjäger belt and buckle

This was the standard issue Luftwaffe pattern leather belt with alloy buckle. Before the war Luftwaffe leather equipment was





55. Top: The sole of the first pattern of Fallschirmjäger jump boots.

56. The paratroopers' black leather gauntlet-type gloves.

of a natural untreated brown colour, but from 1939 onwards the outer surface of leather equipment was stained with a black dye. Officers wore the standard pattern of Luftwaffe officers belt, with the open two-pronged buckle. (See plates 23, 14, 52, 15, 59, 67.)

#### **Fallschirmjäger jump boots, side lace-up pattern.**

German paratroops were issued with boots of a special design, intended to give additional support to the wearer's ankles, and they rapidly became a distinctive item of their uniform. The first pattern to be issued (plate 8 ) was of a design which laced up along the outside of the foot and ankle. They were manufactured from both black leather and from dark brown leather, while the soles and heels were of moulded rubber with a large chevron patterning (plate 55). There were twelve lace holes to each boot, which reached to just below mid-calf level. These boots were without toe cap seams and they had a broad reinforcing seam running along both front and back.

#### **Fallschirmjäger jump boots, front lace-up pattern.**

Shortly after the outbreak of hostilities in 1939 a new pattern was introduced; it was worn concurrently with the side lace-up pattern until some time after the battle for Crete, when stocks of the original type of boot became exhausted. More conventionally designed than the first pattern boot, the new type laced up the front, was soled and heeled in black leather, and was usually studded; it was also shorter in the ankle than the side lace-up boots. (See plate 63.)

#### **Fallschirmjäger footwear other than jump boots.**

As part of their full issue of Luftwaffe clothing and equipment all Fallschirmjäger had a pair of black leather marching boots which were used for fatigues, various guard duties and certain parades (see Fallschirmjäger Parade Uniform). Later in the war these boots were also worn in combat (plates 51, 25). German paratroopers serving as conventional infantry on the Eastern Front were not precluded from wearing all forms of protective footwear during wet, cold or muddy conditions.

#### **Fallschirmjäger gloves**

The first pattern of gloves issued to German paratroops was produced in black leather and dark brown leather. Both types were identical, having an extended gauntlet-type wrist which was elasticated on the back to give a tight fit to the wearer's wrist and lower forearm. (See plates 56, 59, 7 .) The campaign conducted by Dr. Goebbels to collect warm clothing for the troops serving on the Eastern Front in the winter of 1942/3 resulted in troops wearing gloves of civil origin, both in leather and in knitted wool.

#### **Fallschirmjäger knee protectors**

To protect the wearer's kneecaps from heavy abrasion or serious injury (so easily caused by a rough landing) German paratroopers were initially issued with knee protectors. They consisted of a pair of flat, kapok-filled rectangular canvas pads worn directly over the kneecaps inside the trouser legs and tied in position with tapes. Although they provided sufficient



57. Top: The paratroopers' knee protectors.

58. German paratroopers file to their aircraft. These troops, grasping their static line, are wearing full equipment including knee pads.

protection for air drops, they proved a hindrance if worn on the march, tending to restrict the movement of the knees and rapidly causing chaffing to the skin. The pads were removed as soon as possible after an air drop, the two slit side openings in the paratroop combat trousers allowing this to be done. (See plate 57.)

#### Fallschirmjäger knee pads

Knee pads were issued to German paratroops to replace the earlier knee protectors. These were used by paratroopers engaged in air drops and they consisted of six tubular horizontal pads formed from sorbo rubber and covered with either black or dark brown leather. Each pad was held in position by a set of two strong elasticated and adjustable straps which crossed behind the wearer's knees and clipped on to small button-hooks on the opposite side of the pad. Unlike the earlier knee protectors, these pads were worn over the trouser legs. It was normal practice to take them off (but not to throw them away) once an air landing had been effected, since they tended to become uncomfortable if worn for any length of time whilst marching. (See plates 58, 60.)

#### Fallschirmjäger ankle bandages

A German paratrooper who had sustained a foot or ankle injury and, although passed as fit to jump, felt that he required additional support for his ankles during an air drop could wear ankle bandages. These linen bandages were worn under the woollen socks and were bound fairly tightly around the wearer's instep and ankle, extending about a third of the way up the paratrooper's lower leg.

#### Fallschirmjäger Toque and 'Ohren Schützer'

In keeping with other branches of the German Armed Forces, the wool-knitted toque and the 'Ohren Schützer' (ear protector)—similar to the British Army Balaclava Helmet—were issued to Fallschirmjäger for wear during very cold weather (plate 7). Knitted in blue-grey as well as grey-green wool, these garments performed a very important function: sub-zero weather conditions (commonplace during Russian winters) often resulted in severe frostbite to exposed flesh and cases are on record of soldiers not wearing a toque or knitted ear protector removing their steel helmet to find that the tops of their ears have come away—frozen to the lining of the helmet.

#### The Fallschirmjäger gas-mask and canvas container

In place of the cylindrical metal gas-mask container carried by other members of the German armed forces, paratroopers were issued with a special non-rigid canvas carrying bag (plate 26)<sup>1 2</sup>; this eliminated the possibility of injury that could otherwise have been caused by metal cases during a parachute landing. It consisted of a short tubular bag of grey-green or blue-grey with a heavy duty zip running its entire length and a flap secured by

12. Plate 26 shows the exception to the rule—the normal pattern cylindrical container in use by Fallschirmjäger during anti-invasion exercises held in France during the spring of 1944. By this time many German airborne troops were engaged as combat infantry and as such did not require the special canvas carrying case as described above.





two press-stud buttons at one end. The case was normally hung from the wearer's neck by an adjustable strap. The gas-mask was initially of the standard issue type, but by 1940 a new model (Gasmask 40), made of very strong high-grade rubber, was issued to paratroops.

#### **Fallschirmjäger ammunition bandoliers**

In their particular combat rôle German paratroopers found it necessary to carry more ammunition in action than was possible in the standard issue leather pouches—which also had the disadvantage of being both bulky and dangerously rigid for air drops. The problem, however, was simply overcome by issuing paratroopers with bandoliers made from strong canvas cloth. They consisted of two sets of ten pockets joined by a wide band of canvas, each separate pocket being large enough to hold a clip of five rifle rounds. The bandoliers were designed to be worn hung around the soldier's neck, the flat canvas band joining the two sets of pockets resting on the wearer's neck and the ammunition pockets hanging down on either side of the chest (plate 59). To hold the bandolier flat against the body, two loops of cloth were stitched along the underside of the pockets; when threaded through these, the leather waist belt held the bandolier firmly against the waist. The bandoliers were manufactured from Luftwaffe blue-grey coloured canvas material as well as in plain olive-green; tan; green splinter-pattern camouflage; and tan water-pattern camouflage. Another form of ammunition bandolier made its appearance in 1942 with the introduction of the Fallschirmjäger-Gewehr Model 1942 paratroopers' rifle (FG42). This new bandolier had two sets of four compartments, designed to hold FG42 magazines.



#### **The Fallschirmjäger gravity blade knife**

The use of a specially-designed knife, which could be opened with one hand, enabled paratroopers to cut their way out of their parachute harness in the event of a bad landing. As its name implies, the blade of the knife (which was housed inside the handle when not in use) was activated by gravity: a simple spring-pressure lever freed the blade which, if the knife was held pointing downwards, slid out of the handle and could then be locked firmly in this position by pushing the pressure lever backwards. This action was a considerable advantage over the conventional clasp-knife method which normally required both hands to open. When not in use the knife was kept in the special thigh pocket set into the right leg of the Fallschirmjäger grey-green combat trousers.

#### **Fallschirmjäger splinter pattern camouflage jacket**

A special camouflage combat jacket was designed, manufactured and issued to Luftwaffe personnel serving as conventional infantry (such as troops of Luftwaffe Field Divisions); certain parachute personnel wore this item, although its use by Fallschirmjäger was the exception rather than the rule. (See Colour Reference Section 1.)

#### **The Fallschirmjäger tropical peaked cap, with neck flap**

First introduced for wear on 13th April 1942 this was an item of official issue headgear peculiar to the German parachute

formations and in particular to the Hermann Göring Division serving in North Africa, Tunis, Sicily and Italy. They were popularly referred to as 'Hermann Meyer' hats (a reference to a speech once made by Hermann Göring in which he boasted that if a single bomb was to fall on Germany he was to be known as Hermann Meyer—something he could never live down.) Manufactured from a light-tan coloured material, these hats had a large cloth-covered peak, a detachable neck flap and in most cases a light brown leather chin-strap.<sup>13</sup> All insignia worn on the cap, whilst conforming to the normal Luftwaffe design, was of a flat machine-woven variety in white cotton, with the Reichskokarde being in the normal colours of red, white and black. (See plate 61 and Colour Reference Section 2.)

### The Fallschirmjäger tropical Fliegermütze

To complete their tropical clothing paratroopers were issued with a lightweight version of the Luftwaffe Fliegermütze. This 'fore and aft' cap was manufactured from a tan-coloured cotton, its design and insignia conforming very closely to the blue-grey Fliegermütze issued for normal European wear to both Luftwaffe and Fallschirmjäger personnel. (See plates 62, 63.)

### Fallschirmjäger tropical jackets

The design of the tropical jacket was based on the standard issue Luftwaffe Waffenrock. Manufactured from a lightweight tan-coloured material, the tropical jacket had four patch-pockets, the two breast pockets having box pleats. The pocket flaps were straight edged and were each secured by a single tan-coloured metal button. Five similar metal buttons were positioned down the front of the jacket and when it was worn with the collar open at the neck only four of them were visible (plate 62); the collar could be worn closed at the neck, hook and eye fasteners being provided for this purpose, but when worn in this manner the top button and buttonhole were revealed. Unlike the normal issue Luftwaffe Tuchrock or the Waffenrock, there were no turn-back cuffs to the sleeves, but the sleeves did have the appearance of cuffs. This was achieved by having a row of stitching set about 8cm from the end of each sleeve running parallel to the lower edge of the cuffs. Normal issue shoulder straps were worn: for NCOs and men these were usually of the same quality and colour of material as the jacket itself, although the blue-grey European cloth straps were also worn by individuals. Officers wore their standard issue shoulder straps on all items of tropical uniform. Collar patches were not normally worn on the Luftwaffe/Fallschirmjäger tropical jacket, but there were exceptions to this rule—some senior officers, for example, wore rank collar patches (plate 44). The Luftwaffe version of the National Emblem was worn above the right breast pocket and was machine-woven from white cotton yarn on to a backing cloth of tan-coloured material. Again, exceptions to this rule existed with some individuals using the European issue breast emblem in place of the tropical pattern. Metal National

13. Officer's quality cap cords, both in silver aluminium (of the type worn on the Luftwaffe officers' Schirmmütze) and in matt white, were sometimes worn on these tropical caps. The use of cap cords in place of the light-brown leather chin-strap seems to have been a matter of individual choice.

### Opposite page:

59. Above: The rifle ammunition-carrying bandolier.

60. Below: Paratroopers climbing into their transport plane. Note the elasticated straps for the protective knee pads worn crossed behind the soldiers' knees.

### This page:

61. Top: The 'Hermann Meyer' tropical cap.

62. Centre: Back and front views of the Luftwaffe tropical jacket.

63. Bottom: German paratroopers captured in Italy. The ankle-fastening to the tropical trousers can be clearly seen.





Emblems were also used on the tropical jacket: these were of the detachable pin-back variety—an advantage when the jacket required cleaning. For generals and above these were in gilt, while for other ranks they were in silver alloy.

#### **Fallschirmjäger tropical trousers**

These trousers, which matched the tropical jacket both in colour and quality, were cut fairly full in the leg so that the ends could be worn gathered in at the ankles (plate 62). By means of attached aluminium buckles and cloth straps they were fastened around the wearer's ankles just over the tops to the boots thus giving the trousers a somewhat baggy appearance. A very prominent map pocket with a large flap was positioned on the front of the left leg at thigh level. There were two side pockets and two hip pockets with flaps which usually fastened with concealed buttons.

#### **Fallschirmjäger tropical shirts and ties**

Long-sleeved shirts manufactured from tan-coloured cotton were part of the tropical clothing issued to German paratroops (plate 15). The shirt opened down the full length of its front and there were four small brown buttons positioned from the collar down, the lower button being approximately in line with the wearer's waist. Flaps to the two breast patch-pockets were fastened down by buttons identical to those used on the shirt front. There were also two small brown buttons on each cuff.

As this garment was designed to be worn in place of the tropical jacket, rank insignia in the form of shoulder straps could be worn if required. These straps were of the detachable type, being fitted to the shoulders of the shirt by a 'tongue' on the underside, which passed through a cloth loop stitched to the seam of the shoulder. The small metal button for these, which was sewn on to each shoulder, was painted a desert tan. The Luftwaffe version of the National Emblem was sewn on to the shirt in the usual position over the right breast pocket. This was either of the type which was sewn around the shaped outline to the emblem or the more common type where the emblem — an eagle in flight clutching in one talon a swastika — was embroidered on to a triangular backing of tan-coloured material which in turn was stitched in position on to the shirt (plate 64).

When circumstances required that a tie be worn with the tropical shirt (for such occasions as parades or other ceremonies) two ties were available for wear: one was dark brown while the other was a lighter version matching the colour of the tropical tan shirt. Both were in plain colours without any design.

#### **Fallschirmjäger tropical shorts**

Shorts were another form of tropical wear issued to Fallschirmtruppen: some were very similar in appearance to the famous 'Bombay Bloomers' as used by members of the British Eighth Army during the North African Campaign, while others seem to have been tailored to the requirements of the individual soldier. (See plate 15.)

#### **Fallschirmjäger/Luftwaffe reversible winter uniforms**

German paratroop formations operating as conventional infantry on the Eastern Front were issued with the German Army



64. Above: *The Luftwaffe tropical shirt.*

65. Below: *The reversible camouflaged winter uniform worn by a paratroop despatch-rider.*





**66. Above.** Friedrich August Freiherr von de Heydte photographed at a parade, probably in Germany. The 'Kreta' cuff-title is here being worn on the camouflage jump smock.

**67. Below:** It was not uncommon for personnel eligible to wear campaign cuff-titles to wear two patterns on the same cuff.



reversible padded winter uniforms which, although generally considered to be Army clothing, were also issued to Luftwaffe ground forces as well as Fallschirmjäger formations fighting in winter conditions. They proved to be extremely comfortable and, as combat uniforms, gave freedom of movement and unimpeded use of equipment whilst at the same time affording protection against the severe cold without overheating during periods of exertion. The uniform consisted of a heavy reversible double-breasted over-jacket and matching over-trousers, large enough to be worn over the normal combat dress including the basic field equipment (although German paratroops, like their comrades in the Army, favoured wearing their equipment over the winter jackets). Both the plain padded type (plates 65 ) and the quilted pattern (plates 16, 17) of winter uniforms were used.

### Luftwaffe Waffenfarbe

This was a system of colour identification similar to that used by the German Army. Colours were allocated to various branches of the Luftwaffe, the paratroop arm included, so that personnel displaying their appointed colours on various insignia worn on or as part of their military uniform were recognisable as belonging to a particular branch of the Luftwaffe.<sup>14</sup> The colour allocated to the German parachute arm was gold yellow and this was incorporated in collar patches, shoulder straps, headress and uniforms (see Colour Reference Sections).

### Fallschirmjäger cuff-titles

Two types were issued to paratroopers:

1. Cuff-titles issued to all personnel of certain named elite units: Officers and NCOs and men of the 1st and 2nd Parachute Regiments wore a light green band with gothic lettering which, for NCOs and men, was in grey cotton yarn; the officers' cuff-title bore lettering in silver aluminium, and there was also a silver edging to the top and bottom of the band. All other Fallschirmjäger units (including the remaining troops of 7. Fleiger (Fallschirm-) Division and the Fallschirmschule) wore a cuff-title consisting of gothic lettering on a dark green band; the lettering was in grey cotton yarn for NCOs and men, and in silver aluminium for officers. During 1939, however, the wearing of these three cuff-titles was suspended for the duration of the war.

2. Cuff-titles awarded to individuals as a form of campaign award: Personnel from German parachute units whose active service record fulfilled the necessary requirements were entitled to wear the 'Afrika' (with palms) campaign cuff-title and the 'Kreta' campaign cuff titles. (See plates 66, 67.)<sup>15</sup>

### The Parachute qualification badge

All paratroopers qualifying on completion of their training were

14. A listing of the basic colours used by the Luftwaffe can be found on page 17 of Key Uniform Guide 4, *Luftwaffe Air Crews, Battle of Britain, 1940*.

15. Parachute personnel acting as Field Police were entitled to wear the 'Feldgendarmarie' cuff-title. The 'Kurland' cuff-title could have been worn by any individual paratrooper who took part in the Courland pocket fighting in 1945 provided they fulfilled the necessary requirements (and were actually able to obtain a cuff-title to wear).





entitled to wear the Luftwaffe version of the Parachute Badge<sup>16</sup> which consisted of a black wreath (half laurel and half oak) with a gilt eagle in a diving posture clutching a gilt swastika.<sup>17</sup>

It was introduced on 5th November 1936 and was worn on the left breast pocket of the uniform tunic or in the equivalent position on tunics without external pockets.

### Fallschirmjäger equipment

With the exceptions mentioned above, all equipment issued to German parachute troops was of the same design and quality as issued to Luftwaffe non-flight personnel. (See plates 68, 69.)

16. Before being amalgamated with the Luftwaffe units, the German Army parachute formation also awarded its personnel a qualifying Parachutist's Badge. Instituted on 15th June 1937, it was awarded to those soldiers who successfully completed their parachute training, but it was also necessary for the recipient to complete at least six parachute jumps each year to retain the award. This badge, the issue of which was finally discontinued when the Army parachute unit was absorbed into the Luftwaffe parachute arm, consisted of a gilt wreath, half laurel and half oak leaves, with a silver diving eagle. Set in the top of the wreath was a gilt Wehrmacht eagle and swastika. Like the Luftwaffe Parachute Badge the Army badge was worn on or a little below the left breast pocket or at the equivalent position on the Fliegerbluse. The Army Parachutist's Badge was permitted to be worn on the Luftwaffe uniform by ex-Army paratroopers who qualified for the award even after their absorption into the Luftwaffe Fallschirmjäger regiments.

17. In the cloth version of this badge the wreath was in silver aluminium wire for officers and in grey cotton yarn for all other personnel.

68. Left: *Paratroopers in Rome.*

69. Right: *A company bugler.*



# Fallschirm-Division



4. The cuff-title for wear by NCOs and men of the German Paratroop Division. 5. The Luftwaffe 'Fliegerbluse' as worn by a paratroop Oberjäger. Decorations shown are the ribbon for the 1939 Iron Cross, 2nd class; the Iron Cross, 1st class; the Luftwaffe parachutists qualification badge; and the Luftwaffe Ground Combat Badge. The 'Africa' (with palms) cuff-title indicates that the wearer had at least six months active service in North Africa. 6–8. Luftwaffe paratroop rank insignia: 6. Shoulder strap for a paratroop Oberleutenant; 7. Collar patch for a paratroop Leutenant; 8. Collar patch for a paratroop Hauptgefreiter and/or Oberfeldwebel. 9–12. Paratroop head-dress: 9. The 'Hermann Meyer' cap, the tropical service cap issued to paratroops and men of the Hermann Göring Division; 10. The Luftwaffe 'Fliegermutze', here shown for an officer; 11. The Luftwaffe 'Schirmmutze', here shown for wear by paratroop NCOs and men; 12. The German paratroop steel helmet with camouflage cloth cover.



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Front cover shows a paratroop sentry wearing early pattern parade uniform.

Back cover shows a paratrooper wearing tropical dress and assault equipment.

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