

The Junkers F 13f1e, D-833, was initially taken on board German luxury liners and performed pleasure flights for wealthy passengers. As of 1932 the aircraft was put at the disposal of Theodor Rowehl for his photo-flights, targeting the Polish Westerplatte fortifications near Danzig/Gdansk. (Collection Ott)



## THEODOR ROWEHL AND GERMAN STRATEGIC AIR RECONNAISSANCE

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Equipped with a special Pratt & Whitney Hornet U engine for high altitude flying and fitted with cameras this Junkers W 34 fue, D-2239, undertook flights along the borders of neighbouring countries to document military installations and other strategically important points of interest such as bridges, railway junctions etc. (Collection Ott)

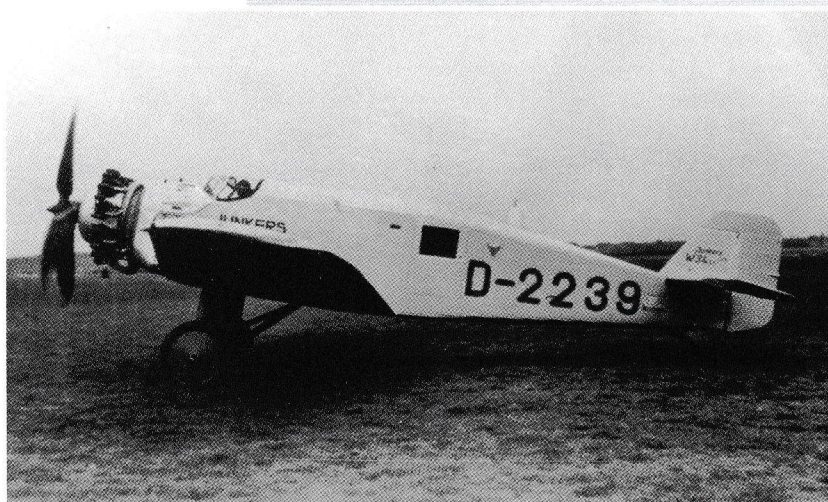
**L**ONG before and after using the Dornier Do 215, German long-range photographic air reconnaissance has been closely linked to a single name: Theodor Rowehl.

Born on 9 February 1894, he commenced a career with the German merchant navy in 1909, but joined the Imperial German Navy as a volunteer on 3 August 1914, immediately upon the outbreak of the First World War. He served aboard the battleships *SMS Westfalen* and *SMS Ostfriesland* until April 1916, when he was transferred to the naval air corps and became an observer with II. *Marineflieger-Abteilung*. Soon promoted to *Leutnant zur See der Reserve*, Rowehl was trained for torpedo and mine-laying duties, and on 9 September 1917, he sank the 440 grt merchant vessel *Storm* by a torpedo attack with his *Friedrichshafen FF 41 A* No. 1213 in the north of the Thames Estuary.

It was on 15 March 1918, that *Lt.z.S.* Rowehl joined the newly established *Fernaufklärerstaffel des Marinekorps Flandern* at Nieuwmunster in Belgium, soon becoming this unit's commanding officer to 31 July 1918. Rumpler C.VII aircraft were used for photo-reconnaissance missions to Cherbourg at the French coast and across the Channel to English targets. His experience was then required for the training of air observers by the Putzig naval flying school at the Baltic near Danzig (Gdansk) until the end of World War I.

After the war, Rowehl worked as a farmer until he was offered a contract as a civil servant, joining the *Severa GmbH* (*Seeflugzeug Versuchssabteilung*) and working once again as an observer on seaplanes as of 1 April 1926. This enterprise was created by the *Reichsmarine* for extending target-towing facilities for their shipborne and land-based, anti-aircraft gunners, all fully in accordance with the terms of the Versailles Treaty. When tasks were expanded to more sensitive fields, *Severa* was first renamed as *Luft Hansa Abteilung Küstenflug* in February 1929, and upon strong protest about the risky misuse of the airline's good name, it became *Luftdienst GmbH*.

As well as his duties as an air-observer based at Kiel-Holtenau, it was Rowehl's personal initiative to commence experiments for improving the techniques of aerial photography. These soon met with the interest of the *Reichswehr* intelligence service, the *Abwehr-Abteilung*, headed by *Fregattenkapitän* Conrad Patzig since 6 June 1932. Rowehl had developed a technique of taking photographs beyond the German border without violating the adjacent territory, by flying as high as possible along the German side and taking







angled shots of objects of interest, mainly fortifications and other military installations. The first occasion this method was used was a 'photo raid' along the Polish border using the Junkers F 13 fle D-833, primarily with the objective of obtaining photographs of the Polish Westerplatte fortifications. With the arrival of the Junkers W 34 fue, D-2239, in July 1932, powered by an original Pratt & Whitney Hornet U engine for high-altitude flying, activities were further increased.

As of 20 May 1933, Rowehl was directly employed by the *Reichsmarine* as head of the photo section of the *Marinestation der Ostsee* at Kiel, while he and all other *Lufdienst* staff were presented externally as belonging to the *Deutsche Verkehrsfliegerschule GmbH* (DVS). The two aircraft at his disposal were also re-registered to DVS at about the same time, and on 7 October 1933 Rowehl was reactivated by the *Reichsmarine* with the rank of *Kapitänleutnant*. His cover as a DVS employee was continued when he was transferred as head of the *Stabsbildstelle* (staff photo section) of *Luftkreiskommando VI (See)* at Kiel on 1 April 1934, with the DLV rank of *Fliegerkapitän* (L).

It was only in October 1934, during an inspection trip to Kiel, that the *Reichswehrminister*, General von Blomberg became aware that the *Abwehr* had carried out aerial photography of the Maginot Line fortifications along the French border, despite clear orders to the contrary. Due to this, Patzig was relieved of his position and replaced by *Kapitän z.S.* Wilhelm Canaris as of 2 January 1935, while *Fliegerkapitän* (L) Theodor Rowehl was appointed as *Staffelführer der Staffel z.b.V.* with his direct subordination to the RLM on 20 November 1934. This was followed by an order of the *Luftkommandoamt* (LA) of the RLM dated 3 January

1935, covering the establishment of the *Fliegerstaffel z.b.V. des Reichsministers der Luftfahrt* (RdL) at Staaken by transferring and employing the staff and equipment previously engaged at Kiel-Holtenau for flight operations on behalf of the *Reichswehr* intelligence department.

Apart from his subordination to the *Wehrmachtsamt Abwehr-Abteilung* for intelligence tasks, the *Staffelführer* was subordinated in all other aspects to the commander of Staaken airfield, *Obersleutnant* Gustav Kastner-Kirdorf (*Generalmajor* as of 1 April 1938), who simultaneously acted as commander of the *Flugbereitschaft des RLM*. This made it easy to give the new unit the cover designation *Flugbereitschaft Abteilung B*, but interestingly the unit's military address was to be shown as R.W.M. (for *Reichswehrministerium*) on the outer envelopes and *H.B.L. Staaken Abteilung B* on inner envelopes, giving proof that all military correspondence was to be channelled via the *Reichswehrministerium*. In fact, H.B.L. might have been a typographic error for 'H.L.B.', reading as *Hansa Luftbild*, which played a dominant role as a cover for the *Fliegerstaffel z.b.V.* in the years ahead.

The two aircraft transferred from Kiel-Holtenau were re-registered to *Hansa Luftbild GmbH* in Berlin as D-OXEL (F 13) and D-ONAS (W 34) by June 1935, but it needs to be emphasized that the Lufthansa daughter company, *Hansa Luftbild GmbH*, never owned any aircraft, but always used aircraft chartered from Lufthansa and *Hansa Flugdienst GmbH*. This was just another civil cover for the activities of Rowehl's small unit, and other than in 1929, this misuse of a company name caused no objection with the airline, with everything being approved officially. Until September

Staff of the *Fliegerstaffel z.b.V. des RLM* gather in a mix of civil and military clothing in the hangar formerly used by the *Deutsche*

*Verkehrsfliegerschule* (DVS) at Berlin-Staaken in 1938. Wearing civilian clothes are (5th from left) Major Theodor Rowehl and (1st from left) Major Paul Achilles, Rowehl's deputy and the unit's Technical Officer (TO), a former *Flugkapitän* with Junkers *Luftverkehr Persien* until 1932. (Collection Ott)





**Theodor Rowehl**

was a long-serving driving force when it came to developing and expanding the strategic reconnaissance organisation in Germany. Leaving his work as a farmer in 1926 he joined Severa GmbH (Seeflugzeug Versuchssabteilung) as an observer. He would make a successful career rising in rank and responsibility as the Luftwaffe expanded and went to war. (Collection Olrog)

1938, all new aircraft operated by the *Fliegerstaffel z.b.V.* were falsely declared as owned by *Hansa Luftbild GmbH* in RLM's publication *Nachrichten für Luftfahrer*, the German equivalent to NOTAM (Notices to Airmen) with international distribution. The aircraft certificates of registration and airworthiness were issued accordingly, giving proof of the civil purpose in case of complications when flying beyond German borders.

Though Rowehl was engaged by the *Luftwaffe* from 1 March 1935 with the rank of *Hauptmann* (E) and promoted to *Major* (E) on 1 April 1936, he usually wore civilian clothing, and the same applied to his crews, all having civil working contracts as Reich employees on detachment to *Hansa Luftbild – Erprobung*, the fictive trial branch of the renowned aerial mapping enterprise. They were mostly recruited from *Luftdienst* units and the neighbouring RLM-*Flugbereitschaft*, all of them holding ranks as *Luftwaffe* reserve soldiers. Their personnel files reveal that they were called to active duty only once, between 20 September and 25 October 1938, as a result of mobilization due to the Sudetenland crisis, before being reconvened again on 26 August 1939 at the dawn of the Second World War.

Quite clearly, all other reconnaissance activities of Rowehl's *Fliegerstaffel z.b.V.* were performed under civil cover, and this was not unique. The British SIS Air Section and the French *Deuxième Bureau* had a similarly creative solution in mind when jointly ordering two Lockheed L-12A Electra Junior aircraft for gathering military information by using civil air intelligence flights over Germany. But these flights came late, with the Australian pilot, Sidney Cotton, at the controls of camera equipped L-12A G-AFTL, beginning only in June 1939.

On 1 November 1938, soon after the Sudetenland activities of providing strategic aerial photographs of Czechoslovak territory, Rowehl was promoted to the rank of *Oberstleutnant*. His outstanding position in *Luftwaffe* air reconnaissance was already honoured on 15 June 1938 when he became holder of the *Militärbeobachterschein Land und See Nr. 1*, the first military observer licence for land and seaplanes. Awards given to crews of *Fliegerstaffel z.b.V.* show that they had been recognised for flights focused on Austria and Sudetenland in 1938, followed by Bohemia and Moravia and Memelland in 1939. The Memel Commemorative 22 March 1939, a bronze medal awarded to *Obstlt.* Paul Achilles, Rowehl's deputy and technical officer (TO) of the *Staffel*, showed him as having belonged to the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) and confirmed on the factual chain of command.

The *Fliegerstaffel z.b.V.*, still under the command of *Obstlt.* Rowehl and based for a while under the cover of *Hansa Luftbild-Erprobung* at Berlin-Tempelhof, continued until March 1939. The prospect of further military action was likely the reason for the organization department of the *Luftwaffe* general quartermaster, the *Generalquartiermeister Generalstab 2. Abteilung*, issuing, on 10 March 1939, the order to reorganize and expand the unit from *Staffel* to *Gruppe*-level under the new designation *Aufklärungsgruppe des Oberbefehlshabers der*

*Luftwaffe* with effect from 1 April 1939. Notably, this order had been given only a few days prior to the establishment of an independent Slovak Republic and the German occupation of the Czech territories as the *Reichsprotektorat Böhmen und Mähren* (Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia).

The new unit, abbreviated as *Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.d.L.*, and retaining *Obstlt.* Rowehl as *Gruppenkommandeur*, was to comprise a *Stab* together with 1. and 2. *Staffeln*. Also with effect from 1 April 1939 the *Gruppe* moved to Oranienburg on the northern outskirts of Berlin where it took residence at *Klostergut Wilhelminenhof*. This was on the opposite side to the large Heinkel aircraft factory there, and it was the intention that the factory's airfield was to be jointly used by *Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.d.L.* For camouflaging its true tasks, the designation *Höhenflugstelle der D.V.L.* was ordered to be used officially, originating from a former department of the *Deutsche Versuchsanstalt für Luftfahrt* which had been existent since 1928.

In addition to its usual tasks of long-range reconnaissance, *Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.L.* became responsible for *Höhenerprobung* (high-altitude trials) in coordination with the *Technisches Amt* (the Technical Office of the Air Ministry). Rowehl moved into a key position and influenced all German projects related to high-altitude flying, far beyond his function as a *Luftwaffe* group commander.

In external communication, strangely the unit had to use then the designation *Versuchsstelle für Höhenflüge* (Test Establishment for High-Altitude Flights) in Oranienburg, but not to be confused with their cover name as *Höhenflugstelle der D.V.L.* as shown above.

In peacetime the *Aufkl.Gr.d.O.d.L.* was subordinated to the *Amt Ausland/Abwehr* of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, the German military intelligence and counter intelligence service headed by *Vizeadmiral* Wilhelm Canaris since 2 January 1935. As before, orders on behalf of the *Luftwaffe*, *Kriegsmarine* and *Heer* were handled alike by *Luftwaffe Generalstab 5. Abteilung* (*Obstlt.* Josef Schmid) and relayed via *OKW Abwehr I/Luft*. For financial and administrative matters, the unit reported directly to the *Verwaltungsamt* of the RLM (RLM/L.D.), and in the case of mobilization it would be subordinated to *Luftgaukommando III* (Lg.Kdo. III), a *Luftwaffe* territorial command based in Berlin-Dahlem.

It seems that the cover designation *Hansa Luftbild – Erprobung* continued to be used even after 1 April 1939, since no documents have been found to date with reference to the name *Höhenflugstelle der D.V.L.* On the other hand, it seems the *Gruppe* did not establish the 1. and 2. *Staffel* prior to the beginning of the war and continued acting under the cover of a civil enterprise, with its aircraft retaining civil D-registrations and aircrews wearing civil clothing. Several of the pilots were awarded the civil title *Flugkapitän*, but all held *Luftwaffe* reserve ranks. In line with that, *Obstlt.* Rowehl himself was formally transferred to the *Offiziere z.b.V. des Reichsministers der Luftfahrt* (at the special disposal of



the Aviation Minister) as of 1 April 1939 as a direct report to the ministry while continuing as commanding officer of the Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.d.L.

Some organizational modifications to the basic orders were issued by *Generalquartiermeister 2. Abteilung* on 10 June 1939 (Nr. 701/39 gKdos.), followed on 3 September 1939 by (Nr. 7118/39 g.Kdos.(III B)). But a major revision, came into immediate effect with an order dated 14 October 1939 (7386/39 gKdos. III B), adapting to military requirements at war.

At this point, the Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.d.L. comprised:

*Gruppenstab*, to be formed by the previous

*Gruppenstab*

1. *Staffel*, to be formed by staff and material of the *Gruppe*

2. *Staffel*, to be formed by renaming

2./Aufkl.Gr. 121

3. *Staffel*, to be formed by renaming 8./L.G. 2

4. *Staffel*, to be formed as *Sonderstaffel* by staff and material of the *Gruppe*.

The 1. and 4. *Staffel* was to be established by further order of the *Gruppenkommandeur*, *Obstlt.* Rowehl.

The airfield of Wildpark Werder was named as the location for preliminary deployment for *Stab*, 1., 3., and 4. *Staffeln*, while 2. *Staffel* was to remain at Prenzlau airfield. Under war conditions Wildpark Werder had become the base of the *Generalstab* and *Luftwaffenführungsstab* (codename 'Kurfürst'), and so it was reasonable that the majority of the Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.d.L. was ordered to be available at a nearby airfield. If the *Gruppe*'s move to Wildpark Werder ever took place, it must have been only very short-lived since Oranienburg continued to be its base throughout the war. The distance from Oranienburg to Wildpark Werder was about 65 km, within easy reach on the *Autobahn* by car or by using a Fieseler *Storch* at the disposal of the *Gruppenstab*.

It was only now that the *Gruppe* became subordinated directly to the *Generalstab der Luftwaffe* (Gen.St.d.Lw.), while the reporting line to Lg.Kdo. III was kept, as well as close ties to the OKW and its *Abwehr/Ausland* department for their specific intelligence requirements.

Fully in line with above order of Gen.Qu. 2.Abt., and on the very same day, the Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.d.L. appears in the *Einsatzbereitschaftsmeldungen* (strength readiness reports) of the *Generalquartiermeister* (Gen.Qu. 6.Abt.) for the first time as of 14 October 1939 with a *Gruppenstab* and three *Staffeln*. Each *Staffel* was listed as having a planned strength of nine aircraft, but were reported with only eight on charge with seven serviceable. Since it is unlikely that all three *Staffeln* had exactly the same strength and serviceability, these figures should be taken with some caution. The strength report for the following week, 21 October, is of more interest since it gives the following overview:

- 1./Aufkl.Gr.Ob.d.L. with 8 He 111 and 5 Do 17 P (strength/serviceable - 13/11)
- 2./Aufkl.Gr.Ob.d.L. with 12 Do 17 P and 1 Do 17 Z (13/13)

o) **Flugsport.**  
 Aero-Club v. Deutschland, SW 11,  
 Prinz Albrecht-Str. 5 (Haus der  
 Flieger). T.  
 Flugtechn. Fachgruppe b. D. V. S.  
 e. V., Charlbg. 4, Leibnizstr. 32.  
 Luftkansa-Sportber. Vln. e. V.,  
 SW 68, Lindenstr. 85.  
 Nationalsozialistisches Fliegerkorps  
 Gruppe 4 (Vln.-Mt. Brandbg.),  
 Wilmersbhf., Mohstr. 84.  
 Versuchsstelle f. Höhenflüge Ora-  
 nienburg e. V., Rowehl, Friede-  
 nau, Wilhelmshöher Str. 7.

3./Aufkl.Gr.Ob.d.L. with 4 He 111 P and 5  
 He 111 H (9/5).

It was noted that 3./Aufkl.Gr.Ob.d.L. was undergoing conversion to a new aircraft type.

Interestingly a fourth *Staffel*, 4./Aufkl.Gr.Ob.d.L., appears for the first time in this report, but was removed after some weeks. It was equipped with 3 Do 17 S, 4 He 111 J, 1 Ju 86 and two Do 17 Z (10/6). As can be seen from the variation in types, these were the aircraft originating from the pre-war Hansa Luftbild-Erprobung inventory and reflects the *Versuchsstelle für Höhenflüge* (VfH), which was soon to be established as a registered private club (*eingetragener Verein - e.V.*), legally equivalent to a sports club. But the minds of the eight men who founded the *Versuchsstelle für Höhenflüge Oranienburg e.V. mit Sitz Berlin* were far from interested in sports, when they assembled in the *Haus der Flieger* in central Berlin on 23 November 1939. The elected president became the 'farmer' Theo Rowehl, with members of the club being his adjutant, administration head and technical officer in Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.d.L., while the four others were the chief engineer of the *Generalluftzeugmeister*, (RLM GL/Ltdr. Chef-Ing.), a senior official of the *Reichsfinanzministerium* (Ministry of Finance) and two members of the board of directors of the D.V.L.. The registered seat of this exclusive club became Rowehl's private address in Berlin. The official address book of Berlin listed the VfH under the heading of 'aviation sports clubs' in the city, up to the issue of 1941.

The civilian status was supported externally by the fact that the VfH aircraft retained civil registrations up to the attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, for the purpose of disguising its military tasks. Within the *Luftwaffe*, the VfH was shown as the *Versuchsstelle für Höhenflüge, Sonderformation der Aufklärungsgruppe des Oberbefehlshabers der Luftwaffe*, got its own *Feldpostnummer* (field post number) L.01909, and issued a separate batch of military identification tags for the staff.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the VfH became regarded as very clandestine and mysterious, and its former crews helped to promote that image, which also extended then to the 'ordinary' parts of the Aufkl.Gr.d.Ob.d.L.

Very different to its true task, VfH was listed in the official Berlin directory until 1941 under Rowehl's name and his private home address, Wilhelmshöher Str. 7, as an 'aviation sports club'.  
 (Collection Ott)