

# WINGS



# THINGS

## GREAT PLAINS WING - COMMEMORATIVE AIR FORCE

16803 McCandless Road • Council Bluffs Municipal Airport • Council Bluffs, IA 51503 • (712) 322-2435

### 1st Quarter 2024

#### Wing Leader

Larry Lumpkin  
1715 N. 216th Street  
Elkhorn, NE 68022  
H: 402-289-0835 C: 402-312-4675  
captainllt@cox.net

#### Executive Officer

Greg Jacobson  
1906 Manor Court  
Lincoln, NE 68506  
C: 402-525-2871  
gajacobsen@cs.com

#### Operations Officer

Chad Bosworth  
14725 Ernst Street  
Bennington, NE 68007  
H: 402-861-1880 C: 402-510-6644  
Cbosw2811@msn.com

#### Administration Officer

George DeWitt  
22042 Hackberry Road  
Council Bluffs, IA 51503  
H: 712-328-8716 C: 402-639-4388  
dewittzz@aol.com

#### Museum Officer

Chad Bosworth  
14725 Ernst Street  
Bennington, NE 68007  
H: 402-861-1880 C: 402-510-6644  
Cbosw2811@msn.com

#### Finance Officer

Terry Helphrey  
10142 Josephine Avenue  
LaVista, NE 68128  
H: 402-593-6661 C: 402-578-2014  
terry.helphrey@outlook.com

#### Maintenance Officer

Jerry Mason  
8070 Gold Street  
Omaha, NE 68124  
H: 402-393-0361 C: 402-968-6296  
mason.jerry@cox.net

#### Safety Officer

Jerry Mason  
8070 Gold Street  
Omaha, NE 68124  
H: 402-393-0361 C: 402-968-6296  
mason.jerry@cox.net

#### Development Officer

Greg Jacobson  
1906 Manor Court  
Lincoln, NE 68506  
C: 402-525-2871  
gajacobsen@cs.com

#### Education Officer

Martha Bosworth  
14725 Ernst Street  
Bennington, NE 68007  
H: 402-861-1880 C: 401-926-8418  
martha426@hotmail.com

#### Editor

Terran Tidwell  
3109 Windsor Blvd.  
Oklahoma City, OK 73122  
terran2@cox.net

#### Webmaster

John Hubert  
www.greatplainswing.org

Photo: From the Web



*Franz Von Werra under FBI escort in New York.*

### **We Got Away With It!**

*(from several web sources, Ed.)*

There were many unsuccessful escape attempts in WWII made by AXIS POWs. There are estimates of the number who tried at around 2,200, the great bulk of whom were recaptured, with some several handfuls killed in their attempts.

## ***“Lest We Forget”***

In September of 1945, after the end of WWII, a German POW, Georg Gärtner escaped from Camp Deming in New Mexico. He successfully evaded recapture and lived in the US for some 35 years under several assumed identities, eventually becoming a naturalized Citizen in 1990.

In August 1944, Luftwaffe Lieutenant Walter Manhard escaped the Gravenhurst Camp in Ontario and successfully made it to the US. After marrying and living in the US for several years, he surrendered to authorities in 1952.

In April, 1944, seven German POWs escaped from the Daradun POW camp in India. Three were recaptured. Two escaped East and reached Japanese forces, remaining in Japan until 1947, when they were repatriated to Germany. Two of the seven escaped to Tibet, where they resided with the Dalai Lama until 1950, escaping with him just ahead of the Chinese invasion.

During the entire War, one lone AXIS POW was able to escape and return to his home country.



*Franz von Werra*

Franz von Werra was born as the seventh of eight children of a Swiss noble family in the canton of Valais. His father was the notary Leo Baron von Werra and his mother was Henriette, née von Wolff. Due to financial difficulties, Franz (aged 15 months) and his sister Emma-Charlotte were given up for adoption.

They came to Germany into the childless family of the Prussian major Oswald Carl and his wife Louisa Baroness von Haber (who was of Jewish origin and converted to Catholicism). There he initially experienced his childhood in the Villa Donaueck (today Haus *Maria Trost*) in Beuron. In 1925 the family moved to Cologne.

In 1932 this family was also financially ruined; the adoptive parents separated. Franz von Werra tried to get to America via Hamburg as a stowaway on the cargo ship *Niederwald*, but was discovered.

When he found out he had been adopted as an infant, he reverted to his birth name at the age of 18. He left high school and, after various odd jobs, attended the SA sports school in Hamm in the summer of 1933.

In 1934 he was appointed SA leader and required proof of Aryan status. Through his research (the priest of Sankt Stephan in Leuk provided him with written ancestry evidence), Franz von Werra learned details of his biological family.

When the Wehrmacht began to be built up in 1936, he reported to the Air Force as an officer candidate and was trained at the flying school near Berlin. In 1938 he was promoted to Lieutenant.

He became adjutant of II *Gruppe*, JG 3 and Werra scored his first four victories in May 1940, during the Battle of France. Downing a Hawker Hurricane on 20 May, two days later he claimed two Breguet 690 bombers and a Potez 630 near Cambrai. For this he received the Iron Cross 2nd Class.



*Von Werra and Simba*

After the French campaign he was appointed to the staff of II *Gruppe*/JG 53, promoted to first lieutenant on August 1, 1940 and became adjutant of II *Gruppe* on September 5, 1940.

He was described as engaging in boisterous 'playboy' behavior and was once pictured in the press with his pet lion Simba, which he kept at the aerodrome as the unit mascot.

In a sortie on 25 August during the Battle of Britain, he claimed a Spitfire west of Rochester, and 3 Hurricanes, as well as five destroyed on the ground for a total of nine RAF planes eliminated. There were no corresponding losses recorded on that date by the RAF, but he was credited in any case.

On 5 Sept. 1940, Werra's BF-109 was shot down over Kent and he was forced to crash land in a farmer's field where he was captured by an unarmed cook of a nearby British army unit. Pictures of his shot down Bf 109 E-4 show 13 confirmed aerial victories.



*Von Werra's downed Bf 109 in an English Field*

Franz von Werra was brought to London as a prisoner of war, where he was first interrogated and a few weeks later transferred to the Grizedale Hall prisoner of war camp in the Lake District.

There he made his first attempt to escape on October 7th. He was able to hide from his pursuers on foot for seven days until he was caught.

On 7 October 1940 he escaped from the camp. Three nights later, two British soldiers discovered him sleeping in a farm shelter. After being removed from the hut he kicked their lantern to the ground extinguishing it and ran off into the night. He was spotted two days later and captured, receiving 21 days of solitary confinement and transferred to yet another POW camp in England.

He was then transferred to the Swanwick camp in Derbyshire. At the new camp, Werra joined a group of prisoners in digging an escape tunnel which included forged documents, money, identification, clothing and more. (Think the Great Escape). On December 20th while the rest of the camp was loudly singing, Werra and four others escaped through the tunnel. The other three had been recaptured quickly but Werra had gotten away. He made his way to an RAF Station by impersonating a downed Dutch Pilot. He fooled both the local Police and the RAF well enough he was able to get on the airbase at RAF Hucknall. At that point "Captain Van Lott" made his way to the field, went to the nearest hangar and found an empty aircraft. He was arrested at gunpoint moments later while he sat in the cockpit learning the controls.

In January 1941 he was put on board the *Duchess of York*, with other POWs, headed to a camp in Ontario Canada. During a rail transport in Canada, he jumped out of a window with the help of fellow prisoners, ending up near Smith Falls just 30 miles from the St Lawrence River. Seven other prisoners also escaped the train (Including Lieutenant Walter Manhard mentioned above).

## Nazi Flyer, Ears Frozen, Arrives After His Escape From Canada

Whisked Off by His Consul;  
2 Breaks in England Vain,  
Hitch Hikes Aid Third

By Homer Bigart

A garrulous young German aviator with taped ears and an exuberant grin arrived in Grand Central Terminal early yesterday, eager to tell the world how he escaped from a Canadian prison train, hitchhiked across the Laurentian Mountains, did a bit of sightseeing on Ottawa's Parliament Hill and wound up in Ogdensburg, N. Y., after rowing across the St. Lawrence River.

Baron Franz von Werra found no time for conversation, however. A brusque German consular attache shouldered his way down platform 32 when the train from Ogdensburg pulled in at 6:45 a. m. and collared the twenty-six-year-old pursuit pilot as soon as he alighted. They entered a taxicab and drove to the Hotel Astor, which is the residence of Gustav A. Mueller, German Consul. Reporters watched the lobby in vain the rest of the day, although hotel officials insisted that the



Associated Press  
Baron Franz von Werra, with tape on frozen ears, leaving Grand Central Terminal yesterday

*Newspaper report of Werra's escapades In New York*

Five were recaptured. Apparently, that Werra and Manhard were missing was not noticed until the next afternoon. By then he had crossed the frozen over river into New York. The United States at this point was still neutral in the war and turned himself into police.

The immigration authorities charged him with entering the country illegally and the German consulate paid for his bail. While the American and Canadian governments were arguing over his extradition to Canada, Werra with the help of the German consulate made good his escape into Mexico. He then traveled from Mexico to Brazil, then to Spain, Italy and finally was back in Germany in April 1941.



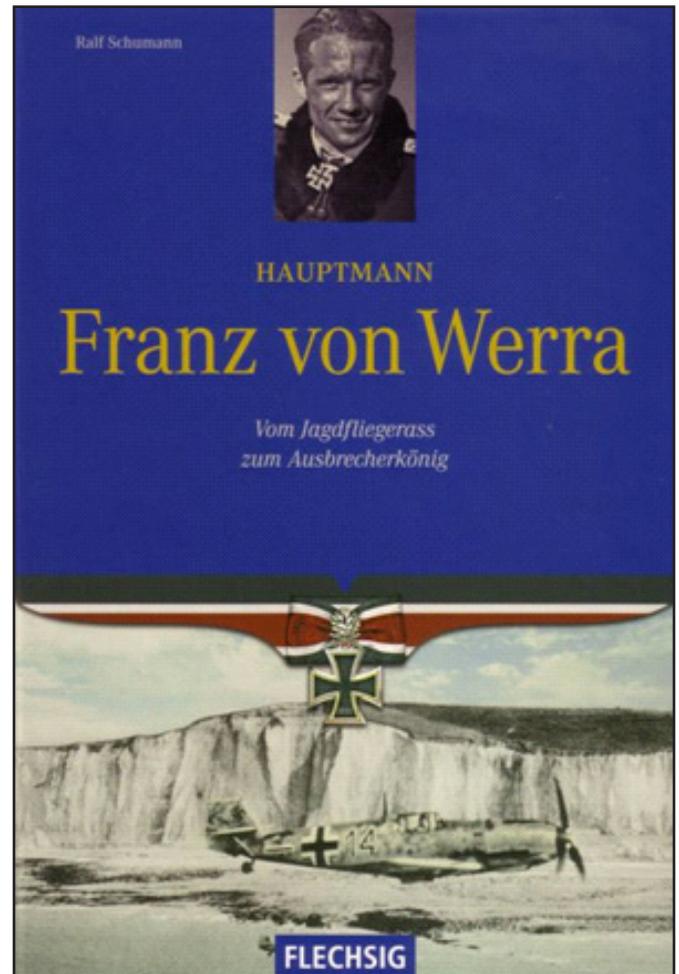
*Von Werra shortly after his return to Germany*

On his return to Germany he was given a heroes' welcome, including being awarded the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross by Adolf Hitler in person.

He was assigned the task of educating German pilots of allied interrogation methods. Upon reporting how well he had been treated while a POW, the Germans improved the treatment of POWs in German camps. He also found time to write his unpublished book titled "My escape from England."



*Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross*



*Von Werra's Book*

After marrying his girlfriend Elfi Traut on August 22, 1941, he was promoted to Captain.



*Franz Von Werra and Elfi's wedding*

On 22 June 1941, German forces launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Two days later, *Oberleutnant* Wilfried Balanz, the commander of I. *Gruppe* of *Jagdgeschwader* 53 was killed in action.

In consequence, *Oberleutnant* Ignaz Prestele briefly commanded the *Gruppe* until Von Werra was appointed the *Gruppenkommandeur* on 1 July. At the time, I. *Gruppe* was based at Hostynne

In early August 1941, I. *Gruppe* withdrew to Germany to re-equip with the new Bf 109 F-4 at Mannheim-Sandhofen Airfield.

On 20 September, the *Gruppe* relocated to the Netherlands where they were based at airfields at Katwijk, specifically *Fliegerhorst Katwijk*, and Haamstede where they were tasked with patrolling the Dutch airspace.

On 25 October 1941, Werra took off in Bf 109 F-4/Z, Werknummer 7285 on a practice flight. His aircraft suffered engine failure and crashed into the sea near Katwijk.

Von Werra was presumed killed, though his body was never found. *Hauptmann* Herbert Kaminski succeeded him as commander of I. *Gruppe*.

At the time of his death, von Werra was credited with 14 victories: 4 in the Battle of France, 1 in the Battle of Britain and 11 on the Eastern Front. He had an additional 3 unconfirmed Victories in the Battle of Britain.

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## 2024 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

### FEBRUARY

Feb. 20 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

### MARCH

Mar. 16 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

### APRIL

Apr. 9-14 Sun 'n Fun Fly-In Lakeland Linder Regional Airport, Lakeland, FL

Apr. 20 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

### MAY

May 18 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

### JUNE

June 15 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

### JULY

July 20 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

July 22-28 EAA AirVenture 2024 Whittman Regional Airport - Oshkosh, WI

### AUGUST

Aug. 3 GPW Open House & Fly-in/Walk-in Pancake Breakfast 8:00 - 12:00 AM Breakfast  
8:00 - 4:00 PM Open House

Aug. 17 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

Aug. 24-25 Defenders of Freedom Air & Space Show Offutt AFB - Bellevue, NE

### SEPTEMBER

Sept. 21 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

### OCTOBER

Oct. 19 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

### NOVEMBER

Nov. 16 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

### DECEMBER

Dec. 21 Wing Meeting 11:00 AM GPW Hangar

## MONTHLY EVENTS

*Council Bluffs Airport - Great Plains Wing hosts a monthly cookout on the 3rd Wednesday of each month from April to October - 5:30 - 7:00 p.m.*

*York, NE Airport: EAA Chapter 1055 hosts a fly-in breakfast on the 1st Saturday of each month from 8:00 to 10:00 a.m. (free-will offering)*

*Crete, NE Airport: EAA Chapter 569 hosts a fly in breakfast on the 3rd Sat. of every month from 8 to 10 a.m.*

*If you would like to put an event on this calendar, please send an email with the necessary information to Terry Helphrey at [terry.helphrey@outlook.com](mailto:terry.helphrey@outlook.com)*