



Kommando Japan

In the third and final part of his series on the efforts — or lack thereof — of the Axis forces to establish viable strategic air-transport routes between the three nations, **RAY FLUDE** turns his attention to Germany, which squandered its opportunities to strengthen its ties to Japan through indecision, delay and a complete lack of understanding of its ally's position

DEUTSCHE LUFT HANSA (DLH) was founded in 1926 by the amalgamation of two smaller concerns; Junkers Luftverkehr AG and Deutscher Aero Lloyd AG. As well as developing domestic routes, the new airline looked beyond Germany and Europe by establishing a subsidiary in South America and developing a route to the Far East. The first part of the latter involved flying from Berlin to Moscow and then on to Irkutsk in Siberia. The journey on to Manchouli, on the Manchurian border, used a part of the Trans-Siberian Railway, and from Manchouli to Peking and Shanghai was handled by the Eurasia Aviation Corporation, a subsidiary created in 1930, with the Chinese government providing two thirds of the capital and DLH providing the aircraft and technical assistance.

The Berlin—Peking air route operated only until 1933, before diplomatic problems between the Soviet Union and China brought it to a halt, but deliveries of the aircraft from Germany to the Far East for Eurasia had opened the door to the possibility of linking the European, Middle East and Far East routes.

The von Gablenz expeditions

In 1933 the airline, renamed Lufthansa, continued to explore extending its route network to the Far East. One possibility was a route through Afghanistan using a strip of territory which had been established by various agreements in the 19th Century as a buffer zone between the Russian Empire and British India. By following this route through the "Wakhan Corridor", as it came to be known, it was possible to arrive in China without

infringing either British Indian or Soviet air space. In 1936, following pressure from Hiroshi Ōshima, at that time Japan's Military Attaché in Berlin, a German team set out to investigate the possibility of an air route from Kabul in Afghanistan across the Pamir mountains and into China.¹

This expedition was led by *Kapitän* Carl August von Gablenz, a soldier who became a pilot after being wounded in the First World War, a leading figure in the development of commercial air transport in Germany and later Chief Executive of Lufthansa. The planned flight was to cross barely mapped territory without the use of any external navigational aids. The team left Kabul in Junkers Ju 52/3m D-ANOY on August 24, 1937, heading for Xi'an and travelling through the Wakhan Corridor at 18,000ft (5,500m) between the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush. The expedition very nearly reached Soochow (Suzhou) in eastern China but ran short of fuel.

The intrepid crew took off from Xi'an on the return journey and, after a forced landing owing to engine problems, became caught up in fighting between rival Chinese warlords at Lob Bazar near Chōtan. After being taken captive for a month, the crew was released and allowed to return to Kabul. The aviators were hailed as heroes on their eventual return to Berlin in October.²

Building on this success, Lufthansa opened a mail and freight route to Baghdad in Iraq on October 29, 1937, which, on April 1 the following year, was extended to Tehran in Iran and on to Kabul, in order to be ready to link to China by the direct route. The route from Kabul into China through the Wakhan Corridor required a 2,000-mile (3,200km) flight from Kabul to Pao Tow

(Bautou) in northern China. It was by far the shortest and most direct of all the routes available, but its accessibility depended on the political situation in Afghanistan. The Soviets became suspicious of these developments and this, coupled with unrest in China, forced Lufthansa to end the route at Kabul.

Some negotiation took place with Britain over routes across India in the late 1930s; and beginning on April 22, 1939, a survey flight, again led by von Gablenz, flew from Baghdad down the Persian Gulf and across India to Bangkok in Thailand using a route which had been agreed with Britain. A full DLH commercial passenger service to Bangkok opened on July 25 that year using Junkers Ju 52/3ms, but only three flights were made before the outbreak of war.³

To show what was technically possible, on November 28, 1938, civilian Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor D-ACON, under the command of Kapt Alfred Henke, had flown via Basra in Iraq, Karachi in India and Hanoi in French Indochina (Vietnam) to Tokyo in 42 flying hours. This was intended to be part of a round-the-world flight, but the American government would not allow the aircraft to return to Europe across the USA.

Wartime extension

The drive to extend Germany's route network to the Far East continued after the outbreak of war, and in January 1942, when the Military Agreement was signed by all three Axis powers, there was some commitment to creating air services between the three. Goering had weakened the wording of this commitment during the negotiations, however, and maintained "that the proposed restoration of an air-force link between Germany, Italy and Japan is not possible because the range of available or planned aircraft is inadequate".⁴

VIA LENNART ANDERSSON



ABOVE Former First World War pilot Carl August von Gablenz was one of Germany's most distinguished airmen, having joined Junkers Luftverkehr in 1924 before going on to become the newly formed Deutsche Luft Hansa's first Flight Operations Manager and completing numerous pioneering flights in the 1930s.

BELOW Eighth from the right, von Gablenz stands beside the Junkers Ju 52/3m, D-ANOY, named Rudolf von Thüna, in which he undertook the August 1937 flight from Kabul to eastern China and back. Sadly, von Gablenz was killed flying a French-built Siebel Si 204 transport aircraft in Germany in August 1942.

