

It was during the first half of August of 1941 that there occurred an event which had a deep influence on Hans- Joachim Marseille, as he later told Stahlschmidt. At the beginning of the month Marseille was given orders to transfer an aircraft from Ain el Gazala to Tripoli via Bengazi. A light southerly breeze had been blowing since morning. As Marseille took off he noticed several gray clouds in the sky. A thick fog bank nestled in the gorges of the Derna Mountains.

At first, everything went smoothly. Marseille landed in Bengazi to refuel. The sun could be seen peeking from behind a layer of clouds; the air was sticky and humid, and Marseille felt like he was in a greenhouse. As he saw the wind pick up, gusting across the airfield and forming sand clouds, he began to think that they might be in for bad weather - thoughts which were reinforced by the ground crew.

"Be careful, Herr Leutnant", he said. "It looks like a nasty ghibli."

"The weatherman said the same thing, but he felt that the storm would only brush Bengazi and the flight route to Tripoli."

"I wouldn't count on it, Herr Leutnant."

"I'm flying west, in the other direction. I'll be alright."

The crewman helped Marseille on with his chute, clapped him lightly on the shoulder and jumped down. Marseille took off. As he left Bengazi he left in a northwesterly direction, turned westward over the sea on course for Tripoli; he was flying roughly along the coast, cutting across the wide bays.

Everything appeared to be going well until Marseille suddenly noticed that the wind had changed. The weather front had shifted to the west and now lay in a thick mass, with its offshoots already half-blocking his flight route to the west.

One minute later his visibility was reduced to 200 meters to the south. Windy gusts rattled his aircraft as he gripped tighter on the joystick. Ahead of him could be seen only a thick gray curtain. The desert below him had disappeared into an impenetrable sandstorm. This ghibli came from the depths of the Sahara, shrouding everything, pushing everywhere and bringing furnace-like heat along with it.

Marseille tried to keep the seashore visible to his left. He no longer knew whether his compass was working properly. The storm had overtaken him, engulfed him and blinded him. A glance at the altimeter showed 650 meters. The new compass heading indicated a southwesterly direction, so

that was working ok. But the sand clouds became thicker. He was apparently flying in the center of the ghibli, which had now swallowed him completely.

He must do something. He couldn't permit himself to continue flying into this mess and risk damaging the plane. How would he explain it to Oblt. Homuth? He would be labeled a reckless pilot, for no one would have personally experienced this horrible nightmare. A thought jarred him: "You've got to fly ten minutes to the north, over the sea! It will be better there."

The Leutnant turned the Bf 109 in this direction. Shaken and bounced around, he headed for ten minutes out over the water, but the desert and the sandstorm seemed to follow him. When he once again resumed his original heading, his aircraft was once again buffeted by the winds. It sounded as though hundreds of cattail reeds were beating against his canopy and fuselage. A glance at his fuel gauge indicated that he only had a half an hour before he would simply fall from the sky. Should he again turn back over the sea? There, no one would ever find him.

Would he - as always - have luck on his side? What would happen if it had run out? What if Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt turns out to be right when he once told Marseille - who never forgot them - that "You can have luck, Jochen, but never talk about it."

He must simply trust to that luck. At first he tried to climb out of it, but even at 1000 meters he still found himself in the same gray-brown soup. Time was passing far too quickly. Five more minutes left, then four. He would have to do something now. Jochen pushed the stick forward, the aircraft's nose dropped down. He kept his eyes focused directly ahead, constantly checking the altimeter, the compass and the fuel gauge and suddenly he saw a massive perpendicular shadow in front of him emerge from the grayness of the sand. He remained fixed on it. The Arco dei Fileni sprang from the dust like a fata morgana. But it was real. Marseille overflew it, made a turn, and found the Arco airfield. With a visibility of barely 100 meters he made a smooth wheeled landing. As he climbed out of his machine, the men from the flight control came rushing up.

"Where did you come from", asked the first runner to arrive.

"From the sky, as you can see", retorted Marseille and, despite the tension from this murderous flight, a boyish grin crossed his sweat-covered face.

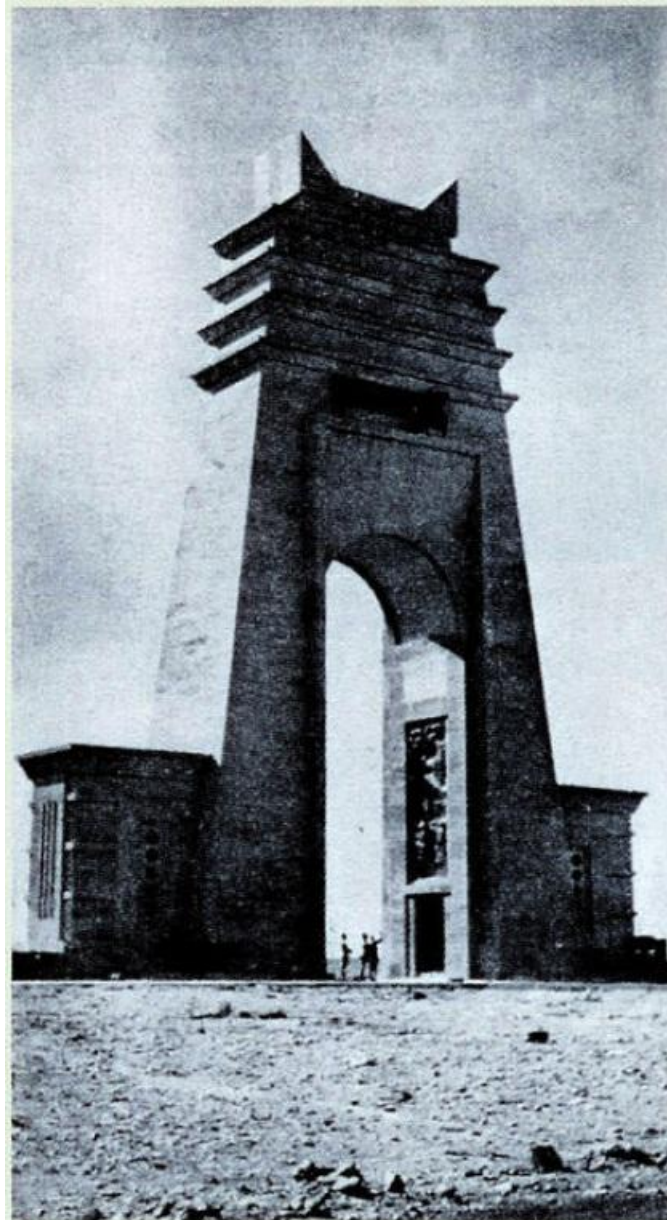
"Man, how did you get here? You can't see anything out here", called the officer, out of breath from running.

"I came from Bengazi", explained Marseille.

"Everything's socked in there, too!"

"When I left it wasn't."

"Then you can celebrate your birthday tonight in Tripoli", said the Hauptmann and grinned at Marseille.



*ABOVE:* Arco Philaenorum, the Italian triumphal arch which stood on the border between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, was also the location of a German airfield. Note the two points at the summit which, if visible during a sandstorm, allowed German aircraft to locate their nearby aerodrome. The arch was known to British and Commonwealth troops as 'Marble Arch'.