



**The Luftwaffe chief must take the blame for the momentous Me 262 screwup.**

# Goering's Big Bungle

By Walter J. Boyne

**T**he fabled Messerschmitt Me 262, the world's first operational jet fighter, has had more "might have been" stories attached to it than any other aircraft.

Some suggest that the jet aircraft would have thwarted the D-Day invasion and led to vastly different outcomes for the war, if only German leaders had given it sufficiently high priority and accelerated its introduction. Most of these scenarios blame Adolf Hitler for destroying the aircraft's war-winning possibilities by insisting that it be used as a bomber rather than as a fighter.

This theory is shortsighted. Hitler can't be blamed for ruining the Me 262. The real culprit would be none other than Hermann W. Goering, chief of the

AP photo



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**Photo at top left: Adolf Hitler confers with high Nazi officials, including Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering (far right). Below left: An Me 262 lands at Lechfeld, Germany.**

Luftwaffe and the Reich's second-highest ranking official.

Exactly how much damage Hitler did to the Me 262 remains a source of controversy. Me 262 production was delayed "because Hitler intervened in 1944 with an ill-timed order to convert the Me 262 to a fighter-bomber," stated the *US Strategic Bombing Survey*. "Virtually every manufacturer, production official, and air force general interrogated by the survey, including Goering himself, claimed to have been appalled by this order."

## Project 1065

Germany's Project 1065, which led eventually to the Me 262, was to design an aircraft for test engines promised for 1939. The new aircraft, while a research vehicle, was intended to be developed into a Luftwaffe fighter. The initial design reflected the general lack of knowledge about both the jet engine's potential power and its potential difficulties. Project 1065 was a simple, low-wing monoplane with the characteristic straight Messerschmitt single-spar wing and a conventional "tail-dragger" landing gear. The engines were mounted in the wing roots.

As the engine grew in size and weight, the original Project 1065 was redesigned as a much larger aircraft, with engines moved from the wing roots to nacelles beneath the wing. Having learned much from the ill-fated placement of the Bf 109 landing gear, the Me 262's gear retracted inward, being stored in an enlarged forward lower fuselage area that gave the fighter its shark-like appearance.

The increase in weight of the BMW engine prompted the Messerschmitt engineers to employ a fix long used by aeronautical engineers—sweeping the wing back to adjust the center of gravity. The design eventually had about 18 degrees of sweep-back, enough to give it a modern appearance and help somewhat in reducing drag at high speeds.



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Yet when Hitler made these recommendations, so often cited as detrimental to the Me 262, the aircraft's fate was already decided.

"By May 1945, 1,400 jets had been produced," the USSBS continued. "Had these planes been available six months earlier with good quality pilots, though they might not have altered the course of the war, they would have sharply increased the losses of the attacking forces."

Surprisingly, the Fuehrer's net effect on the fate of the twin-jet fighter may have been more helpful than harm-

ful. Hitler's intense and often quite knowledgeable interest in armament production spurred weapons development. His selection of Albert Speer as Reich minister for armaments and munitions did much to overcome the inherent faults in the chaotic German management systems.

### Fatal Optimism

The real causes of the Me 262's lack of effect came instead from the conflicting personalities and decisions that characterized the Nazi regime—and one baleful decision made by Goering.

***The first Me 262V1 prototype, seen here, was outfitted with a Junkers Jumo 12-cylinder liquid-cooled piston engine and propeller.***

In February 1940, long before France was defeated, Goering decreed that the development of jet engines be stopped—because the war would be over by 1941.

His words had immediate effect—only about 35 engineers were left on the jet engine program. The first large order for jet engines (80) did not occur until 1942.



If Goering or one of his subordinates had possessed the vision to give research in metallurgy and jet engines the very highest priority in February 1940, it is possible that German jet fighters could have been introduced in 1943, when they could have been used to much more deadly effect.

Hitler's big mistake was in selecting the corrupt dilettante Goering to lead the Luftwaffe.

The first prototype, the Messerschmitt Me 262V1, flew on April 18, 1941, powered not by jets but by a workhorse Junkers Jumo 12-cylinder liquid-cooled piston engine used on aircraft such as the famous Ju 87 Stuka. Test pilot Fritz Wendel (who held the world's absolute speed record of 469.22 mph) found the aircraft to have relatively pleasant flight characteristics—once airborne.

The piston engine was fortuitously retained on the next major test flight, when two BMW 003 engines were fitted to the prototype. Wendel's flight was hair-raising, as both jet engines failed shortly after a long takeoff run. His skills—and the pounding piston engine—allowed him to drag the airplane around the pattern for a quick landing.

In the meantime, Anselm Franz was developing what he later described as his “bread-board” jet engine, the Junkers Jumo 004. Two were installed in the Me 262 V3 prototype.

The intrepid Wendel attempted a takeoff early on the morning of July 18, 1942. The tail-down attitude of the aircraft caused the jet exhaust bouncing off the tarmac to blank out the elevators, forcing him to abort on the short hard-surface runway at Leipheim.

### More Bad Decisions

Analysis suggested a risky fix. He was to “tap” the brakes at about 112 mph so that the nose would dip down and the tail would lift. He did just that at 8:40 a.m., and launched the world's first operational jet fighter into the air and into legend.

Despite its evident potential, the Me 262's progress was hindered by a variety of ill-advised decisions, some made long before, and some continuing to be made by a mixed bag of people. Wilhelm E. Messerschmitt himself was more concerned about maintaining the current high profits from the Bf 109 and the projected Me 209 production lines than about allocating sufficient resources to Me 262 development.

Incalculable damage was also done by Gen. Ernst Udet, head of the technical department. Udet was Germany's greatest living ace from World War I, with 62 victories. A great aerobatic pilot, he was also a totally incompetent manager and an alcoholic.

***This Me 262, designated as a training aircraft, was captured at Lechfeld, Germany, in 1945.***

Reichsmarschall Goering had selected him for the post, partly because of their World War I association, and partly because his very incompetence rendered him less of a threat. Udet committed suicide on Nov. 17, 1941, and was succeeded by Field Marshal Erhard Milch.

Milch had both industrial and command responsibilities in World War II. This made him conservative, and he did not embrace the introduction of the Me 262 at a time when he was struggling to increase German aircraft production.

Into 1943, Milch sided with his longtime enemy, Messerschmitt, in preferring the Me 209. His position was supported at the time by the general of the fighter arm, Maj. Gen. Adolf Galland.

Things began to change on April 22, 1943, when Galland finally got to fly the airplane. A 104-victory ace, Galland saw the Me 262 as a solution to the current Allied aerial strength and to their imminent aerial superiority. Milch soon committed himself to mass production of the Me 262 at the expense of the Me 209.

Supervising everything, if in an

indolent, capricious manner, was Goering.

While the bureaucratic and developmental battles were raging, the crucial work for the Me 262 program was conducted by Franz's team at Junkers. Their initial Jumo 004A design was built in small numbers, and could thus obtain the necessary high-grade steel that the temperatures generated by a jet engine required.

Unfortunately for the engine, Germany was in desperate straits for such materials as chromium, molybdenum, nickel, titanium, and tungsten. The new advanced submarine construction program had a higher priority than jet engines. The production engine was therefore built with only about one-third of the vital high-grade steel. The primitive turbine blade design, rigidly mounted, imposed such stress that the inferior metal used in the compressor blades failed often and early.

These and other factors resulted in a service life of only 10 to 25 hours for a 004B4 engine.

The limping Me 262 program had completed only a few prototypes by mid-1943, but their performance commanded ever greater respect. At this time, Hitler asked Milch not to risk reducing the number of other fighters produced by diverting too much effort to the Me 262.

Shortly thereafter, in pondering how to defeat the inevitable Allied invasion of France, Hitler gave birth to the concept of using fast bombers to break through the Allied air superiority. Whether they dropped bombs accurately or not, he believed a constant bombing of the invasion beaches would keep the enemy heads down for those vital first few hours.

He passed his ideas on to Goering. On a visit to the Messerschmitt plant on Nov. 2, 1943, Goering asked Willy Messerschmitt if the Me 262 had any bombing capability.

The wily Willy, knowing full well that little or no effort had been given to making the Me 262 a bomber, answered that it could carry two 1,100-pound or one 2,205-pound bomb, and that the design changes necessary to do so could be done in two weeks or so.

Meanwhile, the Me 262 was committed to full production. On Dec. 5, 1943, Hitler asked that jet fighter-bombers be developed for front commitment by the spring of 1944. He intended to use them to keep the enemy heads down.

## The Jet Competitor

Messerschmitt's archrival, the Ernst Heinkel Aircraft Co., used its own resources to develop both jet engines and a prototype fighter, the He 280. Heinkel was awarded a contract for its development in March 1940, as a backup to the Me 262. The He 280 made its first powered flight on April 2, 1941, 15 months before the Me 262 took to the skies. The He 280 never reached operational service, however, as neither Udet nor Milch was enthusiastic about the radical nature of a jet fighter. Nonetheless, test results were encouraging and the aircraft demonstrated its combat potential in a convincing "dogfight" with a Focke Wulf Fw 190.

Early in 1943, a contract was let for 300 He 280B-1 fighter-bombers, powered by the Junkers Jumo 004 engines and capable of a top speed of 547 mph.

Heinkel's manufacturing capacity was already overwhelmed, and so the Siebel firm was to build the He 280B under contract. However, with the characteristic quick flip-flop Luftwaffe management of the time, the He 280 program was officially canceled on March 27, 1943. The Me 262 had superior range, and both aircraft required the scarce Junkers Jumo 004 engine.

Heinkel would re-enter the jet fighter field with the notorious He 162 Volksjaeger in the fall of 1944.

Hitler had now conferred top priority status on the program, something that accelerated it, and which more than offset the harm caused by his later insistence on employing the aircraft as a fighter-bomber. But in totalitarian Germany, bombed by day and night and beset by overlapping chains of command, conflicting priorities, and competing forces within the Nazi party, Hitler's orders often did not have much effect.

### Too Little, Too Late

Actual Me 262 production proceeded slowly, so that it was not until April 1944 that preproduction aircraft were allocated to Erprobungskommando 262, to train pilots and develop combat tactics. The next month, Hitler discovered that no Me 262s were ready to deliver bombs. Hitler famously remarked that not a single one of his orders had been obeyed.

Goering jumped on the blame bandwagon with a bit of spin, declaring that the airplane was now a "superspeed bomber."

Time was running out for Hitler, Germany, and the Me 262 program. On June 8, 1944—two days after the Nazis needed the Me 262 the most—Hitler ordered that the initial production of the Me 262 be as a bomber only. This had the usual effect of disrupting production

lines, priorities, and deliveries, but still had no real effect on the program. The 004B engine went into full production for the first time that month.

Production increased slowly, and it was not until September 1944 that there were enough engines in the pipeline to permit delivery of 90 Me 262s. By then, it was far too late to have a significant influence on the war.

About 1,400 Me 262s were completed, and it is estimated that some 300 actually reached combat.

April 10, 1945 epitomized the futility of the Luftwaffe's efforts in the face of Allied air dominance. On that date, some 60 Me 262s engaged more than 1,000 Allied bombers and fighters. Twenty-seven Allied aircraft were shot down, but 31 Me 262s, more than half the defending force, were lost.

The slow introduction of both the aircraft and the engine, at a time when Allied strength was building, meant that Hitler's decision on the use of the Me 262 as a fighter-bomber had no effect whatsoever on the outcome of the war.

The first Allied jet, Britain's Gloster Meteor, also entered service in 1944, and the United States had its own jet fighter under development. The Me 262 was the first of its kind, and fearsomely advanced, but for Nazi Germany, it was too little, too late. ■

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