

Fighting German Jets: Air Force, Part 36

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The Luftwaffe's Me.262 fighter. PHOTO: U.S. AIR FORCE

The original concepts of jet engines go back to 1910, but practical development only began about 1928 when a young Royal Air Force officer, Frank Whittle, began working on one; his first patent was filed in 1930 and his first test-bed engine was run in 1937, although it was too large to fit in any aircraft. Meanwhile, a German engineer, Hans von Ohain, was embarking on a similar project; his first test engine was also run in 1937.

The next step was to design an engine suitable for an aircraft and to test fly it. On Aug. 27, 1939, the first jet airplane took to the air—the Heinkel He.176. Whittle's work led to the flight of a stubby little airplane, the Gloster E.28/39 on May 15, 1941. Both countries then applied the new technology to wartime needs. By war's end, roughly a dozen jet designs had flown in Britain, Germany, Japan and the United States; the Luftwaffe had introduced two types into combat, the Me.262 fighter and the Ar.234 light bomber and reconnaissance aircraft, while the RAF had brought one to operations, the Gloster Meteor. Canadians played only a small part in early jet developments, but many had direct experience with the new types, either in combating the German machines or as Meteor pilots.

The Me.262 has been the subject of intense study, controversy and mis-understanding. The prototype was first flown on April 18, 1941. But in the manner of a man wearing both belt and suspenders, the aircraft was initially tested with a conventional engine in the nose, just in case its two BMW 003 engines failed. It was not flown as a pure-jet airplane until July 18, 1942. Even so, two years would pass before the Me.262 entered Luftwaffe service.

Delays in getting the Me.262 into action have often been blamed on meddling by Hitler and his wish to see it employed as a bomber. This would actually have made sense if it had been operational in time for D-Day in June 1944. The truth is more prosaic. Initially, the Me.262 was held back by unreliable engines, in part because new metal-lurgical methods were needed to overcome high temperatures. Engine fires and failures were common. In the spring of 1944, the running life of a newer Jumo 004 engine unit was barely 16 hours. This meant that it might fail at eight hours or last for 24. No fighter squadron could operate such a machine until the engine life had been raised to at least 25 hours, which was finally attained in July 1944. At that time a few bomb-carrying Me.262s raided the Normandy invasion area, but they were so insignificant that their presence was not even noticed by Allied intelligence.

Photographic reconnaissance had kept the Allies reasonably current about German jet progress. Direct contact was made on July 25, 1944, when a Mosquito of the RAF's 544 Squadron encountered a Me.262 at 30,000 feet over Munich. Thereafter, the 262 became a serious threat to Allied high-altitude recce aircraft.



The cockpit of a Me.262A., PHOTO: U.S. AIR FORCE

On Aug. 28, 1944, two United States Army Air Force pilots, flying P-47 Thunderbolts, destroyed a 262 as it landed near Chievres, Belgium. The first Royal Canadian Air Force sighting of a jet came on Sept. 9, 1944, when pilots of 411 Sqdn. spotted one without engaging it.

While deployed as fighter-bombers, Me.262s conducted sporadic raids on airfields, bridges and troops. The Nijmegen bridge was a target particularly favoured by the Luftwaffe, and it was around that site that Second Tactical Air Force pilots began meeting the jets with some

regularity. The raids were chiefly pinpricks, carried out by one or two fighters at a time, and none achieved significant results.

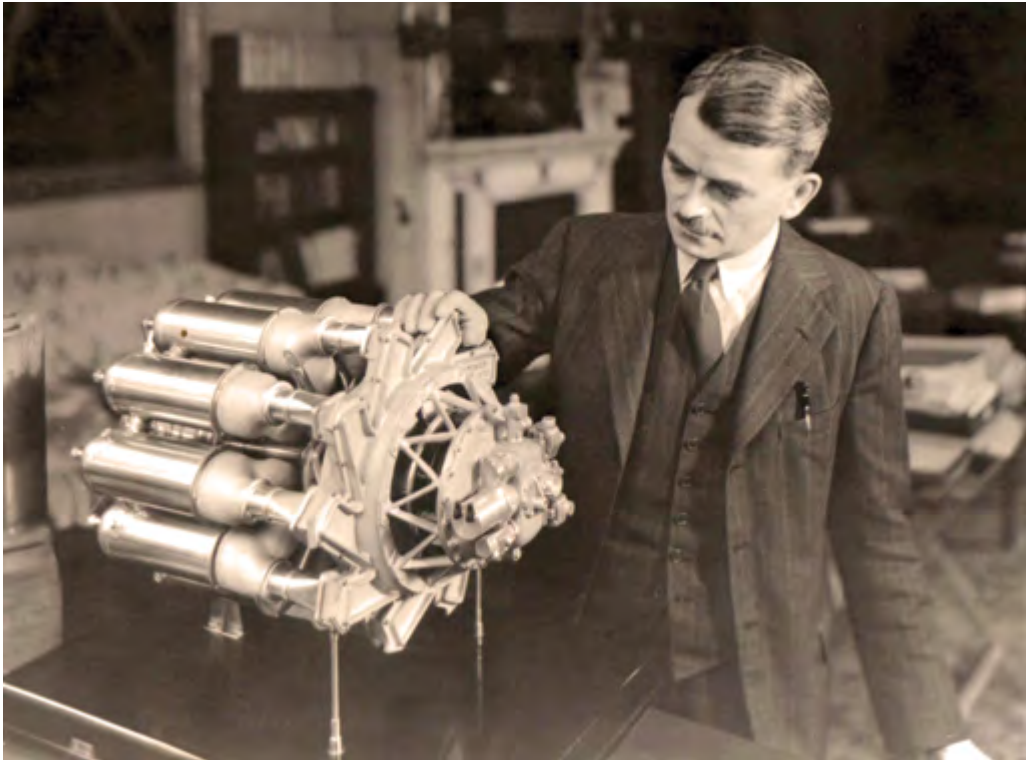
It was near Nijmegen that RCAF pilots first tangled with the jets. On Sept. 28, Flight Lieutenant John B. McColl of 416 Sqdn. damaged a 262, and on Sept. 30, Flt. Lt. Ronald G. Lake of 441 Sqdn. damaged another. A third RCAF "damaged" claim was submitted on Oct. 2, 1944, by Flying Officer Forrest B. Young of 442 Sqdn.

Royal Canadian Air Force airfields were on the receiving end of more effective Me.262-delivered bombs. Five attacks on Grave, Holland, on Oct. 2, 1944, proved especially troubling; 16 RCAF personnel were injured while on the other side of the field, several members of the RAF were killed.

Revenge came on Oct. 5, 1944, when five Spitfire pilots of 401 Sqdn. shot down a fighter-bomber piloted by Hauptman Hans-Christopf Buttman as he attempted to bomb the Nijmegen bridge. The successful pilots were Squadron Leader Rod Smith, flight lieutenants Hedley Everard and Robert Davenport plus flying officers John MacKay and Andrew Sinclair. This was the first British or Canadian jet "kill." Unlike the USAAF victory, it was a sustained aerial action lasting several minutes as the Spitfire pilots took turns at shooting bits off the jet, until it went down in flames.

Despite the odds, it was a hard-fought action. Smith described the jet as doing better high-speed rolls than a Spitfire and capable of very high-speed turns. MacKay reported that "the pilot was hot and put the aircraft through everything in the book." Having participated in the first RCAF aerial victory over a jet opponent, MacKay damaged another Me.262 on Jan. 1, 1945. He would also be the last RCAF pilot to score such a victory over a jet adversary—a MiG-15 shot down June 30, 1953, when he was flying on exchange duties with the United States Air Force in Korea.

On Oct. 12, the enemy achieved some success. A lone Me.262 dropped two 500-kilogram bombs aimed at Grave. One missed, but the other landed in the dispersal area of 416 Sqdn. This killed five airmen and wounded 10 others. One Spitfire was destroyed and nine damaged. Matters would have been worse but for heroic firefighters of 127 Wing and two pilots, flight lieutenants John McColl and Dave Harling who taxied aircraft out of the area despite the presence of exploding ammunition and burning gasoline. A raid on the 13th missed the airfield completely, but another on the 20th killed one airman, wounded eight and damaged 18 aircraft.



Frank Whittle examines a quarter-scale model of a turbo-jet engine.

PHOTO: ROY FOWKES

In spite of its speed—a maximum of 540 miles per hour—the Me.262 was as vulnerable as any other airplane to attack from above, and diving Allied fighters could catch a cruising 262. The jets were particularly vulnerable when landing or taking off. Moreover, the jet bases were easily identified by scorch marks on the runways. The Second Tactical Air Force ordered standing patrols over the most frequented 262 airfields, a tactic known as “rat-catching.” The Germans in turn circled the bases with anti-aircraft defences so that the jets eventually landed under virtual flak umbrellas.

Me.262 production was high, with roughly 1,440 built in one year, and peak production of approximately 300 in February 1945. This was achieved through German dispersal of factories to inconspicuous locations, which negated strategic bombing directed against them. Nevertheless, no more than 500 ever reached either training or operational units, peak combat strength, achieved about April 1, 1945, was about 200, and the maximum number of fighter sorties flown in one day was 55.

Hundreds of 262s were destroyed on railway flatcars hit by Allied medium bombers. The jets which reached combat units were plagued with difficulties inherent in the introduction of new aircraft types, including mechanics struggling to adapt to a new and unfamiliar engine technology. Apart from engine failures, the 262 was prone to undercarriage malfunctions. Even the tail plane occasionally failed during high G manoeuvres.

From October 1944 onwards, most operational Me.262s were deployed against American daylight heavy bomber raids. Swarms of USAAF escorts ensured that the jets would have little chance to engage the Fortresses and Liberators. Mustangs and Thunderbolts engaged the Me.262s from the highest altitudes right down to their landing patterns. It was estimated that one German jet was lost for every American aircraft the German jets shot down.

Following 401 Squadron's success of Oct. 5, 1944, the next Canadian victory involving a jet was on Dec. 3, 1944. Flying Officer John Garland was flying a Tempest of 80 Sqdn. at 1,000 feet when he spotted a 262 almost "on the deck," apparently returning to Rheine airfield. He fired only one brief burst and saw no strikes, but the German pilot lost control in a high-speed stall and crashed.

Before the war ended, RCAF pilots had shot down 11 further enemy jets and damaged at least 19 more. Not all were Me.262s. The Luftwaffe had introduced the Ar.234 reconnaissance aircraft into service in August 1944 and the bomber version in December 1944. On Feb. 13, 1945, Squadron Leader David Fairbanks, an American member of the RCAF, destroyed an Ar.234 while flying a Tempest of 274 Sqdn. However, he mistakenly identified it as a Me.262.

The most successful RCAF pilot vis-à-vis the German jets was Flt. Lt. Richard Audet, a Spitfire pilot in 411 Sqdn. He is best known for having shot down five conventional German fighters in as many minutes on Dec. 29, 1944. On Jan. 23, 1945, Audet destroyed two Me.262s—one in the air and one on the ground. He followed up this success by damaging another 262 on the ground on Jan. 24, 1945. Audet was killed by flak March 3, 1945, while strafing German rail traffic.

Although most RCAF jet "kills" were scored by Spitfire and Tempest pilots, two fell to Typhoons of 439 Sqdn. On Feb. 14, 1945, KG 51, a unit of the Luftwaffe, flew 55 bombing sorties against British and Canadian forces near Cleve, Germany. Flying officers Lyle Shaver and Hugh Fraser, having shot up a train, were returning to base at 7,000 feet when they spotted two Me.262s in line abreast formation heading west at 3,000 feet. The Typhoon pilots dived on their targets; the first one blew up under Shaver's guns; the second shed an engine and crashed after being hit by Fraser. A third KG 51 machine was shot down that day by RAF aircraft.

Commencing in January 1945, Bomber Command crews—RCAF included—reported occasional nocturnal brushes with Me.262s. Although the Germans developed a radar-equipped, night-fighter version, few were deployed operationally. Most of the jets reported at night were standard aircraft whose pilots found their quarry through ground control directions, moonlight and the naked eye. Some reports of Me.262 night-fighters may have been cases of faulty aircraft recognition, induced by intelligence briefings about new threats. Matters were much more straightforward when RAF "heavies" operated in daylight, and on March 31, 1945, No. 6 (RCAF) Group had a bitter encounter with Me.262s.

That day, Bomber Command sent 469 "heavies" to bomb U-boat construction yards at Hamburg. The bombers flew in a loose "gaggle" with fighter cover. The first waves bombed

ineffectively through cloud and turned for home. The last wave, comprised of aircraft from No. 6 Group, was late and approached the target just as the escorts were withdrawing.

Based at Parchim airfield in Germany was the 3rd Staffel of JG.7, flying Me.262s. Most of their fighters were committed against American bombers, but between 12 and 20 aircraft of III/JG.7 closed on the Canadian bombers. In addition to their formidable 30-mm cannons, each enemy jet carried a new weapon—24 deadly 55-mm R4M air-to-air rockets fired in salvos that saturated a portion of airspace.

The first attack appears to have been made on Lancaster D of 429 Sqdn., piloted by Warrant Officer Keith Weld who was engaged over the target at 0859 hours. In the next 12 minutes, the Canadian crews reported approximately 50 encounters with the jets. The gunners fired thousands of rounds, defending their aircraft and trying to assist other bombers that were under attack. It was a grim battle.

Weld's report noted that "between 0903 and 0905, five Lancs and one Halifax were seen to go down in the target area. Four Lancs were on fire. Five parachutes were seen from the other Lanc and seven parachutes from the Halifax." In all, five Lancs and three Halifaxes of No. 6 Group were shot down; 33 crewmen were killed and 23 taken prisoner. Among the dead was Flight Sergeant Lucien Campeau, 35, who had remustered in September 1943 from mechanic to air gunner to join younger men in battle.

Several of the bombers endured multiple attacks. Lancaster H of 429 Sqdn. was attacked four times by Me.262s that damaged the upper turret, destroyed the starboard aileron and left a large hole in the starboard wing. The aircraft's captain was Flying Officer Stanley Avis. His gunners, flight sergeants H.C. Ross and Jack Whitehead, directed him through successive corkscrew manoeuvres that probably saved them all.

Lancaster X of 424 Sqdn. put up a particularly stout defence through three attacks. In the first of these the mid-upper gunner, Flt. Sgt. Stewart Robinson, reported strikes all over the 262. One gun jammed, and his final burst was with his remaining .303. The enemy fighter went down, apparently streaming fire. Meanwhile, the rear gunner, Flt. Sgt. Charles Howes, opened fire on another jet. Two of his four guns jammed but he continued to engage the fighter until it broke away. The gunners succeeded in deterring aggressive attacks and the Lancaster returned to base undamaged.

The RCAF gunners were handicapped by the relative lack of "punch" provided by their .303 machine-guns. At the time, American bombers were armed with .50-calibre guns. Also lacking were gyro gun sights, which helped fighter pilots deal with high-speed targets. Furthermore, the relatively loose nature of "gaggle" formations limited the ability of bombers to offer mutually supporting fire. In the heat of the battle, the gunners claimed four Me.262s destroyed, three probably destroyed and four damaged. These were very optimistic figures; no Me.262 losses on this date can be tied to the Hamburg battle.

The Me.262 has achieved a certain mythic fame, given many “what ifs” surrounding its history—most of them conveniently forgetting the teething problems that the aircraft encountered during its development. Towards the end of the war, a few elite fighter pilots banded together into a small unit (JV.44) that destroyed about 50 Allied aircraft. Nevertheless, even the most experienced German ace could be shot down—as happened to General Adolph Galland on April 26, 1945. The greater number of Me.262s was flown by ordinary German pilots, many of them converting from conventional bomber to jet-propelled fighter aircraft. The 262 was not quite a “super plane” and it was bombed and shot down by Allied fliers both ordinary and exceptional.