

The German Jet Me-262 in 1944: A Failed Opportunity - Part II

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During August and September Galland lobbied unsuccessfully against the plane being used as a bomber. During September, 72 were produced as bombers and only 19 as fighters.¹ Galland was, however, able to organize a small fighter test group with a few Me-262s. In September an American daylight raid on the Messerschmitt works at Augsburg and the neighboring airfield of Lechfeld, resulted in the I/KG 51—which was being refitted with Me-262s—and Galland’s test group being subject to the attack. Six Me-262 fighters were all that they could send up to meet the attackers. They were unable to prevent the 60 Me-262s, which were to be used as “Blitz bombers,” from being destroyed on the ground.²

At the beginning of October, apparently on orders from Hitler, Major Walter Nowotny, one of Germany’s most successful fighter pilots on the eastern front, and his Me-262 fighter unit—now a *Gruppe*—were posted to the airfields of Achmer and Hesepe, near Osnabrück, athwart the main American bomber approach route. Nowotny, who had replaced Thierfelder after his death, soon recognized that much training would be necessary before he could expect to lead his team with any prospect of success. Luftwaffe Command, however, demanded operations forthwith. The daily sorties they could put up against the enemy formations and their fighter escort numbered a mere three or four. Yet, in the course of a month, these few jets knocked out between 22 and 50 aircraft. By the end of October, they themselves had been reduced from 30 to three serviceable planes—less as a result of enemy action, nearly all owing to technical problems and pilot errors.³

During October, 65 Me-262s were produced as bombers and because of the growing necessity to have more fighters attacking the ever increasing Allied bomber formations, 52 were produced as fighters.⁴ It was this necessity that prompted, in October, aircraft production concentrating almost solely on fighters, with seven new types coming into production (Me-262, Ar-234, Ta-154, Me-163, Do-335, Ju-388, and He-162).⁵

¹ German Aircraft Production June 1944-February 1945, Appendix I to Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

² Adolf Galland, **The First and The Last: The Rise and Fall of the German Fighter Forces, 1938-1945**, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957), , pp. 263-265.

³ Galland, **The First and The Last**, pp. 265-266; Cajur Bekker, **The Luftwaffe War Diaries** (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p. 530.

⁴ German Aircraft Production June 1944-February 1945, Appendix I to Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

⁵ F/Lt Leslie P. Bamford, R.A.F. APWIU (US), The Activity of the Rustungsstab from October 1944 until the end of the War, APWIU (2nd Air dis Wing) 64/1945, June 15, 1945, p. 3, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October

Also, because of their relative success, Hitler was convinced that the Me-262 was really an excellent fighter plane, and in November he permitted the formation of the first jet-fighter wing.⁶

On November 8, five Me-262s of Nowotny's unit took off from their bases near Osnabrück to battle the American bombers, which day after day had been subjecting the jet airfield to fighter-bomber attacks. So much so that the Me-262s had only been able to take off and land under the protection of a whole *Gruppe* of Fw-190s and concentrated flak. Nowotny shot one American plane and then reported one engine failing, and shortly thereafter he was attacked by a flock of P-51s, and either was shot down or crashed. In either case he died.⁷

Around the middle of November there was to be a two-day discussion under the chairmanship of Goering at Gatow airfield in the western outskirts of Berlin. All highly decorated unit commanders, including the heads of bomber, fighter, and reconnaissance commands, were to be present. Goering told them he wanted their help to give the Luftwaffe back its reputation. He said:

“The German people expects that because we have failed – failed disgracefully. This is the Luftwaffe's darkest hour. The nation cannot understand why it is that the Allied bombers can come waltzing over the Reich as they did on the very day of our party congress and the fighters do not take off – because of fog, or because they are not ready, or because they are indisposed....”

He forbade any repetition of “fruitless wrangling” regarding the question of whether the Me-262 should be used as a fighter or as a bomber since his decision to give the plane to his vastly more experienced bomber pilots was already of long standing.

Goering said they were on the threshold of the battle that will win us the war [undoubtedly a reference to the Ardennes counteroffensive]. Then saying that commitments prevented him from leading the discussion, he was having the General of Bomber Pilots take his place. And as he was leaving he said he would like to break the news that the General of Fighter Pilots had been promoted to the rank of Generalleutnant. “My dead Galland, I share your delight.” Then he left.⁸

The heads of the fighter, reconnaissance, and bomber commands reported in a few words on the situation in their respective departments. They were largely devoted to the weaknesses, the stoppages, the things that were no longer functioning. The night fighters were doing more than their sting, but they were short of aircraft and their organization was in a bad way. According to Steinhoff, the daytime fighter defenses against the mass attacks of the four-engine bombers was

1943-December 1944, Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

⁶ Galland, **The First and The Last**, pp. 265-267.

⁷ Bekker, **The Luftwaffe War Diaries**, pp. 537-538.

⁸ Johannes Steinhoff, **The Final Hours: A German Jet Pilot Plots Against Goering** (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1977), pp. 31-34.

so hopeless a prospect as to be hardly worth taking about. “The ban on discussion of the Me-262,” according to Steinhoff, “made things even more futile.”

Next the General of Bomber Pilots talked about the notion of mass bombing England. “We knew, every one of us, that nothing could be done that would make any difference, nothing that might have diverted the ineluctable course of events.”⁹ Even if a tentative effort had been made to build a proper aircraft—a long-range four-engine strategic bomber—it would have been too late. As for the fighters capable of escorting a German bomber formation to the island and back, they simply did not exist. “The *Jagdwaaffe* [the Luftwaaffe Fighter Force] was not even capable of providing effective air defense over the Reich.” Still, according to Steinhoff, they talked of a bomber offensive against England, as if there was really a commander somewhere who had the air power to strike blows and who was just waiting for the order to let loose.

The fighter pilots, a tiny minority among the participants, followed the discussion in a mood of “baffled amazement.” Then they were told that there would be a fresh discussion on political commitment, faith in the Fuhrer and victory. A so-called National-Socialist Guidance Officer¹⁰ attached to bomber command gave a political pep talk. During the discussion Galland sent Steinhoff a note that read “Under pressure from the Fuhrer the Reichsmarschall has given permission for the first jet-fighter group to be set up. Do you want to command it?” Steinhoff sent the note back with two words “Many thanks!”¹¹

Steinhoff rushed back to his Fighter Group to hand over the unit to his successor. The ground and operations staff of the new group, Fighter Group 7, were already in Brandenburg, waiting for him. The ground staff were from a bomber group that had been disbanded; the pilots came from flying schools or from other fighter or bomber units. The three wings of Fighter Group 7 were based at Brandenburg, Parchim, and Kaltenkirchen, just north of Hamburg. The group subsequently came to include the experimental fighter unit that had been commanded by the late Nowotny – the man, Steinhoff believed, who had done so much to prove that the Me-262 was a first-class fighter aircraft.

The first machines began to arrive. They came in sections on long railway trucks from the south of the Reich. The mechanics, assisted by a team from the Messerschmitt works, started assembling them. The wing commanders who took the young pilots in hand and trained them were all successful fighter pilots with front experience but even they did not really have enough experience against four-engine bombers. Only Nowotny’s old experimental unit—now the third wing of the group—had been in numerous aerial engagements to work out combat tactics for jet fighters. By the end of November they were in the air, training in flights of three and in small formations. It took six weeks before Steinhoff felt that a unit was taking shape; that is, before they were able to start proper formation training, and he could report that, within limits, they were ready for action.

⁹ Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, p. 34.

¹⁰ A post created by Hitler’s decree of January 8, 1944, to “bring about unqualified ideological unanimity between government and officer corps.” Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, p. 35 note.

¹¹ Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, pp. 35, 39.

Colonel Günther Lützow, at that time commander of the 4th Air Division, came to see how they were getting on. He was, according to Steinhoff, impressed by the technical breakthrough represented by the 7 Fighter Group having gotten the Me-262 ready for combat duty, and said they were on the threshold of a new era in the battle against the four-engine bombers. Lützow said that Galland had not seen Goering for weeks. His attempts to have the *Jagdwaffe* made the sole focus of their air-armament effort had evoked no reaction. The intrigues about his person appeared finally to have undermined Goering's and Hitler's confidence in his continued fitness for the post of General of Fighter Pilots, and it looked as if his dismissal was only a matter of time.¹²

Towards the end of November Steinhoff received a message asking him to meet Galland the next day in Parchim, where one of the wings of 7 Fighter Group was organizing. When they met, Galland, after listening to Steinhoff's report on the unit, abruptly vented his ill humor by accusing Steinhoff of not getting the unit on its feet fast enough and not acting rigorously enough, and told Steinhoff to get his group flight fitted out first and show what the aircraft could do in action. Steinhoff said he would. Galland calmed down and said, forget it. Then he complained about Goering. And before leaving he told Steinhoff to be careful of criticizing his superiors, because he was on the black list and that if it was any consolation, Galland went on, that he was on the list was well.¹³

Meanwhile, it was only at the beginning of November that Speer and Saur succeeded in persuading Hitler to allow the Me-262 to be produced and used as a fighter.¹⁴ During November, 101 Me-262s were built as fighters and during December the number increased to either 124 or 125. During those two months none were produced as bombers.¹⁵

But of the Me-262s produced as fighter during the last quarter of 1944, the number that actually went into combat was small – probably only 40 actually saw combat. Even those that were flown were relatively ineffective because of poorly trained pilots. The others were non-operational for lack of proper maintenance and failure to provide an adequate pilot training program. Because the fuel quota for the Luftwaffe was cut back drastically, Steinhoff hardly had enough fuel even to allow the minimum number of flying hours needed to train halfway competent pilots. Many of the aircraft were lost through forced landings or damaged during landings, as some rolled off

¹² Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, pp. 45, 46, 48; Bekker, **The Luftwaffe War Diaries**, p. 530.

¹³ Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, pp. 48-50.

¹⁴ Appendix I, Me 262, to F/Lt Leslie P. Bamford, R.A.F. APWIU (US), The Activity of the Rustungsstab from October 1944 until the end of the War, APWIU (2nd Air dis Wing) 64/1945, June 15, 1945, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

¹⁵ German Aircraft Production June 1944-February 1945, Appendix I to Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Overall Economic Effects Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy, October 31, 1945, p. 161, File: 3, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy (Final Report), *ibid*.

runways because of brake problems. Others were taken out of operation awaiting replacement engines.¹⁶

The Allies were meanwhile still flying day and night in December. Galland's Fighter Reserve had by now reached respectable proportions and he intended to decimate a major formation of four-engine bombers by a properly coordinated attack using prop fighters in conjunction with their jets. A difficulty facing him, however, was the Me-262's limited range and flying time. On the other hand its climbing capacity meant that it could take off very late and, the bombers flying relatively slowly, could contact the enemy with great precision.¹⁷

Steinhoff reckoned to fly their first big operation in early January, since the winter high that usually sets in around that time promised the ideal kind of weather for their plan. To enable Galland to make the best possible use of his fighter power while the bomber formation in the Reich's air space, he decided to move Steinhoff group to the west of the country. The idea was that the jets should have first go at the enemy in order to scatter the fighter escort and shake up the bomber formation, thus making thing easier for the prop fighter groups of the Fighter Reserve, which would attack further east. With the object of finding two or three airfields suitable for jet fighters, Steinhoff drove west a few days before Christmas to have a look at fields around Soest, north of the Ruhr district, and on the Lower Rhine.¹⁸

Just as Steinhoff finished his tour, around Christmas, he was informed that a new commander had been appointed in his place, and that further duties would be determined in due course.¹⁹ Steinhoff, knowing it probably would not do much good because Galland himself was on the way out, went to see Galland about his situation. After listening to Steinhoff said "You know

¹⁶ German Aircraft Production June 1944-February 1945, Appendix I to Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Aspects of German Aircraft Production, September 1939-April 1945, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 333/1945, June 21, 1945, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Appendix I, Me 262, to F/Lt Leslie P. Bamford, R.A.F. APWIU (US), The Activity of the Rustungsstab from October 1944 until the end of the War, APWIU (2nd Air dis Wing) 64/1945, June 15, 1945, *ibid.*; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 6, Mr. Seiler, Chairman, Board of Directors, Messerschmitt Company, May 16, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, "USSBS Interrogations," (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 56, Reichsmarshal Herman Goering, June 29, 1945, *ibid.*; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 8, Lt. Gen. Karl Koller, Chief of Staff of the Luftwaffe, May 23-24, 1945, *ibid.*; The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Over-all Report (European War), September 30, 1945, p. 25, File: 2, The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Over-all Report (European War), (Final Report), European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Overall Economic Effects Division, United States Strategic Bombing Survey, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy, October 31, 1945, pp. 161-162, File: 3, The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy (Final Report), *ibid.*; Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, p. 47.

¹⁷ Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, p. 50.

¹⁸ Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, p. 50.

¹⁹ Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, pp. 51-52.

yourself I can't do anything for you. No one up there listens to me any more anyway." Galland ended the conversation by stating "We lost this war long ago," he said somberly."²⁰

In all, before the end of the war a grand total of 1,308 Me-262s were said to have been built, although thanks to Hitler's order that this type should be used as a fighter-bomber, only a small percentage of them became operational owing to the delays caused by the execution of the necessary modifications.²¹ And Hitler's insistence upon the use of the Me-262 as a bomber delayed its production and operational use as a fighter by six months, thereby depriving Germany's air defense of a new and effective weapon.²²

²⁰ Steinhoff, **The Final Hours**, p. 64.

²¹ Group Capt. S. D. Felkin, A.D.I.(K) and U.S. Air Interrogation, Some Notes on the Jagerstab, A.D.I.(K) Report No. 345/1945, July 4, 1945, p. 6, File: 64AA German Aircraft Production, October 1943-December 1944, Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945, European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243.

²² U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 8, Lt. Gen. Karl Koller, Chief of Staff of the Luftwaffe, May 23-24, 1945, Interrogation Reports and Transcripts of Interrogations of German Industrial, Military, and Political Leaders, April-July 1945, "USSBS Interrogations," (Entry I-10 31, [NAID 561363](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, printed copy, Interview No. 56, Reichsmarshal Herman Goering, June 29, 1945, USSBS Interrogations, April-July 1945, *ibid.*; The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Over-all Report (European War), September 30, 1945, p. 25, File: 2, The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Over-all Report (European War), (Final Report), European Survey Published Reports and Supporting Records, 1937-1945 (Entry I-10 6, [NAID 560340](#)), Records of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, RG 243; Generalmajor Hans-Detlef Herhuth von Rohden, compiler, August 1946, "Reich Air Defense in World War II: A Strategical-Tactical Survey," in Isby, ed., **Fighting The Bombers: The Luftwaffe's Struggle Against the Allied Bomber Offensive** (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, 2003) , p. 37.