

# VOLKSJÄGER VICTORY

**MAY 4, 1945: HEINKEL HE 162  
PILOT LEUTNANT RUDOLF SCHMITT  
CLAIMS A TYPHOON**

The last German fighter to enter service during the war was Heinkel's He 162. It went from drawing board to front line combat in just six months but at terrible cost – from the slave labourers who died building it to the pilots who died trying to fly it. But did it achieve any success at all?

**BELOW:** The sorry remains of Flying Officer Tom Austin's Hawker Tempest JN877 SA-Y being recovered on the back of a lorry. Was this the only aircraft ever shot down in combat by a Heinkel He 162?

**T**he Heinkel He 162 was an aircraft born out of urgent requirements, innovative design under pressure and pure desperation.

During the summer of 1944 it was considered that while the twin-engine Me 262 was well suited to combat against bombers and their escorts at medium to high altitude, it was incapable of tackling the large number of fighter-bombers now ranging over the battlefield at low level.

Even with reduced armament and lower performance requirements, the Me 262's insurmountable Achilles heel was the sheer cost and time taken to produce it. Managing two engines also required a degree of skill and expertise that few newly qualified fighter pilots possessed.

A single engine jet was needed that could be rapidly and cheaply produced in large numbers using basic materials where possible. It was even decided, initially, that the aircraft in question should be so simple and easy to fly that even 15-year-old Hitler Youth members whose only training was on gliders could pilot it into combat.

The RLM specification of September 1944 called for a BMW 003 jet engine powered fighter that could be built as a flying prototype within five months and on the production lines in six. Heinkel had already spent two months working on a jet fighter design study it called P.1073. This had two engines, one mounted under the nose and another on its back.

It was a relatively simple matter to take this design and scale it down so that only one engine, the one on its back, would be required. Other firms tendered designs to meet the specification – Arado's E.580, Blohm & Voss's P.211 and Junkers' EF 123 or 124, and two from Focke-Wulf – but in the end the Blohm & Voss P.211 emerged as the front runner.

Heinkel complained that it had been given a different formula with which to work out the P.1073's performance so the following day all the other companies were forced to recalculate their figures based on the same formula.

This only served to demonstrate that the P.1073 was lacking in range and was capable of carrying only a relatively light weapons load. Heinkel's representatives, however, pointed out that with aircraft such as the He 177 bomber no longer in production, there was now spare capacity available at its capacious and well-equipped factories.

At the same time, concerns arose about the length and position of the P.211's intake duct. It was close to the ground, which would mean any debris lying around on a less-than-perfect airstrip was likely to be sucked into it. Its shape could also induce unwanted drag.



Finally, on September 23, Hitler ordered the P.1073 into mass production as the He 162. Because it was intended to be so easy to fly, even civilian glider pilots could step into the cockpit and pilot it straight into combat, the project was also given the name *Volksjäger*, or 'People's fighter'.

In his autobiography *The First And The Last*, Adolf Galland wrote: "From the beginning I had strongly opposed the *Volksjäger* project. In contrast to the creators of this idea, my objections were based on factual reasons such as insufficient performance, range, armament, bad conditions of sight, and dubious airworthiness.

"Furthermore I was convinced that this aircraft could not be brought into worthwhile operation before the end of the war. The terrific expenditure of labour and material was bound to be at the expense of the Me 262.

"To my mind all forces ought to be concentrated on this well-tested jet fighter in order to make the best of the possibilities remaining to us. If we scattered our strength once more in this last phase of the war, then all efforts would be in vain."

He went on: "My suggestion was to increase mass production of the Me 262 by having it built under licence by all aircraft factories that were not working to capacity, and further to use all these planes only for the air defence of the Reich. This earned me a sharp rebuke from Göring which ran something like this: 'This is unheard of! Now the general of the fighter arm refuses a jet fighter plane which the armament production is offering him by the thousands within a few months.'

"The *Volksjäger* was to represent a sort of levee en masse in the air. Incredibly schedules were fixed, astronomical production figures were planned. Göring himself became a victim of the national frenzy with which the planning of the *Volksjäger* had infested almost everyone connected with air defence.

'Hundreds! Thousands! Umpteen thousands!' he cried. 'Until the enemy has been chased back beyond the borders of Germany.'

### BUILDING THE PEOPLE'S FIGHTER

Work on building the first prototypes began on October 25, 1944 – 10 days before the last of the detailed construction drawings had even been completed. The He 162 was to be tested with both 30mm MK 108 and MG 151/20 cannon, projected as the A-1 and A-2 versions respectively.

It was also to be fitted with a BMW 003 jet engine, an undercarriage derived from that of the Bf 109 to cut production time and cost, and a Heinkel device first seen on the He 219 night fighter – the world's first operational military ejection seat.

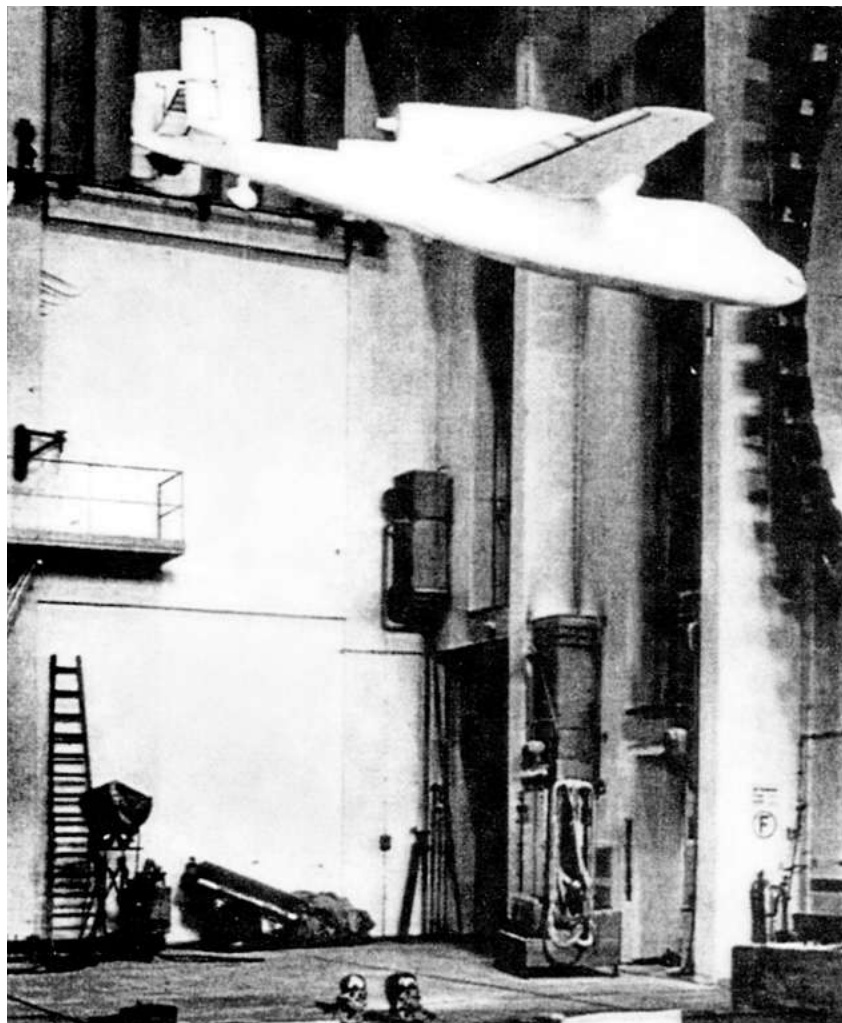
The He 162 M1 (V1) was finished and ready to fly on December 1, 1944. Its maiden flight came on December 6. Four days later, during another test, it was destroyed when instability combined with poor glue bonding led to the leading edge of the starboard wing coming off mid-flight. Test pilot Gotthold Peter was killed.

The second prototype, He 162 M2 WNr. 200002, first flew on December 22. Another eight prototype and pre-production machines followed in quick success and were soon being used to test everything from landing gear and armament to vibration and directional snaking. Meanwhile, Heinkel's factories were gearing up for full production – a quota of 30 He 162A-1s was expected by the end of January 1945.

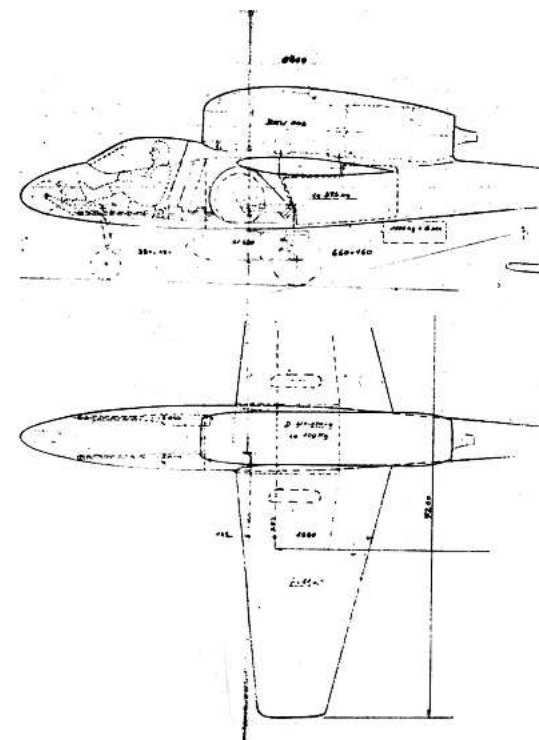
There were five facilities involved: EHAG (Ernst Heinkel AG) Nord Rostock-Marienehe, EHAG Süd Wien-Schwechat, Junkers' Bernburg factory and the underground facilities at Hinterbrühl, codenamed 'Languste', and Mittelwerk Nordhausen.

All of them employed slave labourers – some 22,500 in total, including 8000 at Rostock alone, accounting for 55% of the work force.

During an inspection of the production lines on January 27 it was determined that so far, two production machines had been flown, 12 had had engine tests



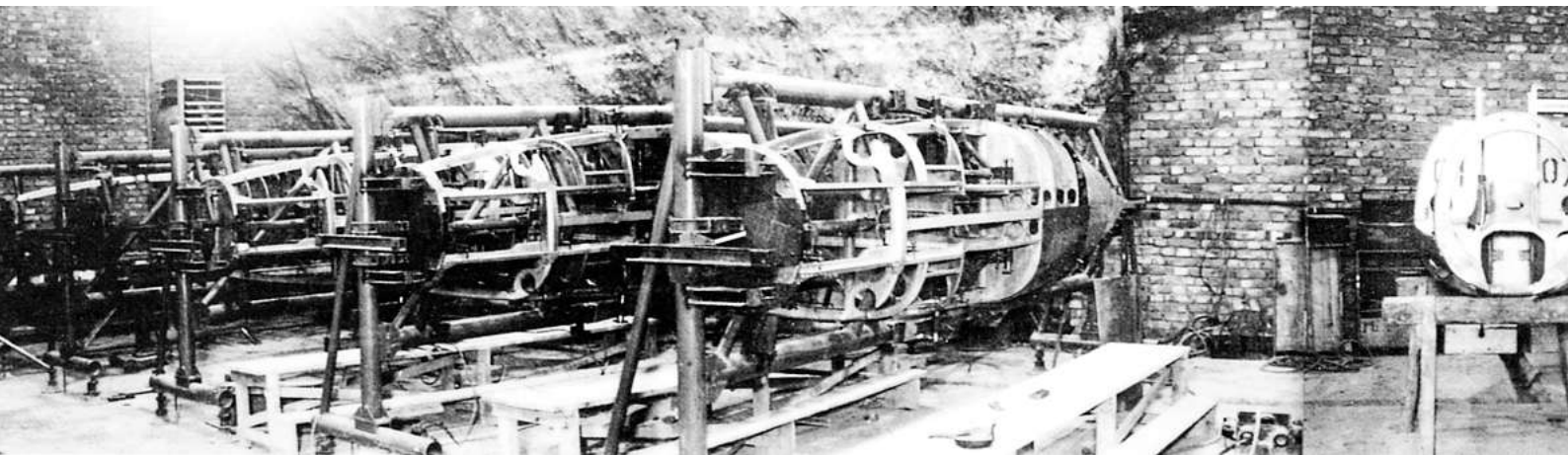
**ABOVE:** A large wind tunnel model of the He 162 being tested in early 1945 at Berlin-Adlershof.



**LEFT:** A drawing of the Heinkel P.1073 design from a report dated September 23, 1944. Work on the project had begun two months earlier, envisioning a larger aircraft with a second jet engine beneath the cockpit. This drawing shows the P.1073 close to its final form as the He 162.

completed, 58 fuselages were complete and another 71 were nearing completion.

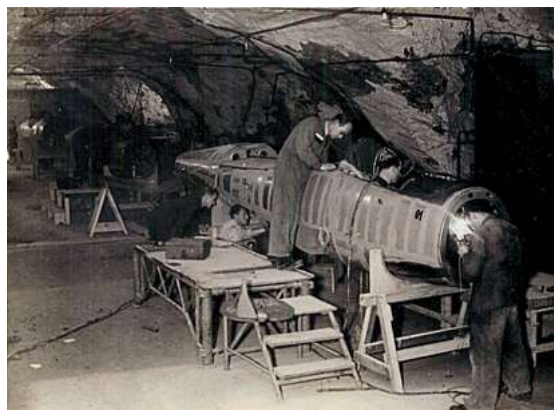
A second test pilot was killed on February 4, 1945. Oberleutnant Georg Weydemeyer crashed the sixth prototype during its 11th test flight. It was found later that there appeared to have been insufficient glue used on the plywood skin covering the ribs of the tail unit.



**TOP:** A row of rear fuselages awaiting components. Manufacturing delays were commonplace as essential parts took days to arrive where they were needed and regular powercuts caused blackouts underground.

**ABOVE:** Fuselages under construction at the underground 'Languste' facility near Hinterbrühl. This was one of five sites involved in He 162 production.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Workers fit the wiring connections inside a He 162 fuselage at 'Languste'.



The first five production machines were ready to go by February 9 – work at Heinkel's factories having been slowed by blackouts resulting from the damage caused to Germany's electrical power infrastructure during heavy bombing.

It was decided in January that rather than form a new Luftwaffe unit to operate the He 162, an established unit should be converted to it, and JG 1 was chosen. I./JG 1 was pulled back from the front line on February 6 for this purpose and its 23 surviving Fw 190A-8s and A-9s given to II./JG 1 to replace losses it had suffered.

The Gruppe, now minus its aircraft, transferred to Parchim, 50 miles south of Rostock, on February 9. No He 162s were immediately available, so I./JG 1's pilots and crew began familiarisation training with EHAG personnel on February 12.

An Auffangsstaffel or 'collection squadron' from 2./JG 1 was sent to Heidfeld – the airfield at Heinkel's Rostock headquarters – on February 27 to pick up a single aircraft brought over from Junkers at Bernburg. This was He 162 M19 WNr. 220002.

A second group of pilots, from I./JG 1, arrived at Rostock on March 4 to collect more aircraft but none were available

A third pilot was killed in a He 162 on March 14, when Unteroffizier Tautz of 2./JG 1 hit a stack of barrels while attempting to land M19. The aircraft span into the ground and Tautz, thrown clear of the cockpit, suffered fatal injuries.

Now there were no He 162s available for conversion training. On March 26, it was announced that JG 1 would relocate in readiness to receive completed aircraft leaving the Junkers production line. A group of 15 pilots from 3./JG 1 moved to Lechfeld but there was still nothing available to fly.

On the 27th, Hermann Steckham attempted to take off on a test flight at Bernburg in production He 162 WNr. 310001 but suffered engine failure which resulted in the aircraft coming down hard. It was a total write-off and Steckham was badly injured.

I./JG 1 was told on March 31 that it would have to move to Leck at the northernmost extreme of Germany. On the same day, with JG 1 personnel now scattered across Germany, He 162 deliveries finally began.

Simultaneously, as the enemy advanced from east and west, evacuation of He 162 production facilities was begun. EHAG Süd at Wien began shutting down on April 1.

He 162 'White 1' was flown by 2./JG 1's Leutnant Rudolf Schmitt for 20 minutes at Parchim on April 3. Having joined the Luftwaffe as an 18-year-old in August 1943, he initially trained at Luftkriegsschule 2 in Berlin before moving to Flugzeugführerschule C6 in Kolberg. In May 1944 he was transferred to 2./JG 107, which was stationed in Hungary, and then 5. and 6./JG 108, based at Wiener-Neustadt. Finally, on February 16, 1945, he joined 1./JG 1, switching to 2./JG 2 shortly thereafter.

Unteroffizier Helmut Rechenbach of 2./JG 1 crashed and was killed while ferrying a He 162 from the factory on April 6, bringing the aircraft's death toll to four.

By April 12, 1945, I./JG 1 had 16 He 162s at Parchim, of which 10-12 were serviceable. Two days later, one of the unit's most experienced pilots, Feldwebel Friedrich Enderle, was killed when his He 162 came down shortly after take-off at Ludwigslust and exploded.



**RIGHT:** The sixth He 162 prototype, M6, rolls down the runway at the beginning of a test flight in early 1945.

The following day, April 15, I./JG 1 began its delayed move to Leck. Flying He 162 'White 7' from Ludwigslust to Husum, a fuel stop along the way, Leutnant Schmitt encountered a Spitfire at 3.40pm but used his aircraft's speed to avoid an engagement, as he had been ordered.

On April 17, Unteroffizier Josef Rieder had a problem with his He 162's flaps on take-off and crashed, suffering serious spinal injuries but the following day Unteroffizier Wolfgang Hartung of 2./JG 1 came down during another transfer flight and was killed in the crash – the sixth He 162 fatality.

#### LAST STAND AT LECK

With I./JG 1 now settling in at Leck, it wasn't long before they were called into action. A report of enemy aircraft in the vicinity at 12.20pm resulted in a pair of He 162, piloted by Feldwebel Günther Kirchner and Leutnant Gerhard Stierner, being sent up.

Stierner reported that just as they left the runway, two enemy fighters flew right over them. Within seconds, Kirchner had activated his ejection seat – but he was still barely off the ground and although the device performed correctly, there wasn't enough time for his parachute to open and he fell to his death.

All Stierner could do was to evade the fighters, which he believed to be American P-47 Thunderbolts. When he came in to land, his undercarriage failed to deploy and he was forced to make a belly landing.

These enemies were, in fact, Hawker Tempests of 222 (Natal) Squadron.

Flying Officer Geoffrey Walkington later reported: "I was flying as Blue 1 strafing Husum airfield when I sighted an aircraft flying in a northerly direction away from the aerodrome. I immediately broke off my attack on the airfield and chased this aircraft which was camouflaged mottled green with a yellow underside and appeared to have twin fins and rudders and one engine.

"The nose of the aircraft had a drooping appearance and the wings (plan view) resembled those of an Me 109. Due to my loss of speed on turning the enemy aircraft pulled away to about 1500 yards. Having recognised this aircraft as hostile by its camouflage, I gave chase, but was unable to close, my IAS being 360mph.

"The enemy aircraft did a 360° turn to starboard which I followed, turning inside. During my turn I managed to close to 1000 yards. Being unable to gain further I trimmed my aircraft carefully and, allowing about three quarters of a ring above the enemy aircraft, I fired short bursts.

"The enemy aircraft then pulled up through cloud which was eight tenths at 3000ft. I followed through a gap and passed the enemy aircraft spinning down out of control from about 3500ft. I then watched the enemy aircraft explode on the ground near Husum aerodrome."

The accounts of the action differ significantly, but the date, time and location matches. It was the first combat loss of a He 162. It would not be the last.

April 20 saw four He 162s despatched to intercept RAF Typhoons strafing targets in the Leck area. 'Yellow 7' and 'Yellow 11' took off first, followed by 'Yellow 1'. 'Yellow 3', piloted by Oberleutnant Wolfgang Wollenweber, was delayed by 10 minutes due to engine problems.

Once he was in the air, he heard that the other three had been unable to locate the Typhoons but when he spotted a burning bus below he realised he must be on their trail. Pressing on, he found the British attacking Husum.

Having already released the safety switch on his cannon, Wollenweber lined up the last Typhoon and pressed the trigger but nothing happened. He lined up the second

machine and tried again but still nothing. In frustration, he shot over the Typhoon barely 5m from its canopy and climbed steeply away.

Spotting him at last, the Typhoons broke off their attack and tried to follow but were rapidly outpaced. Wollenweber flew home.

That afternoon, Leutnant Schmitt had cause to use his machine's ejection seat after suffering a malfunction during a familiarisation flight and yet another pilot, Unteroffizier Gerhard Fendler, was killed during a ferry flight. This brought the total number of non-combat related He 162 deaths to seven.

Another pilot, Feldwebel Erwin Steeb, was forced to eject due to a mechanical failure on April 21. Feldwebel Rolf Ackermann of 3./JG 1 was killed while attempting his land another new He 162 after a ferry flight on April 23 and

the following day the commander of II./JG 1, Hauptmann Paul-Heinrich Dähne, was also killed.

Dähne, new to the He 162, encountered a common problem – when accelerating into a turn, the jet wash from the engine forced the rudder to jam. This made the aircraft uncontrollable and at low level the only thing to do was eject.

It is believed that

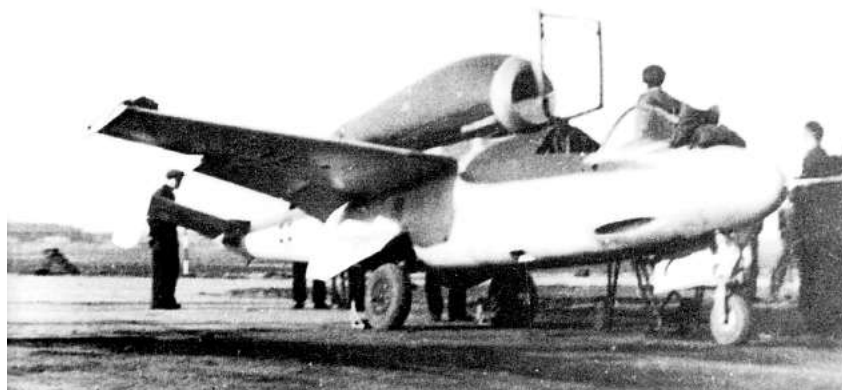
Dähne did attempt to eject but neglected to jettison the canopy of his machine first – not an automatic process. This resulted in him smashing his head against the inside of the canopy, probably killing him before his He 162 hit the ground.

On April 25, Leutnant Schmitt took off in 'White 5' to intercept a low-flying British de Havilland Mosquito at 11.20am but there was no engagement. Two pilots, Unteroffizier Helmut Rechenbach and Fähnrich Emil Halmel,

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**BELOW:** The first He 162A-1 off the production line, WNr. 120001, is readied for its first flight on January 14, 1945.

**BELOW:** A row of He 162s lined up at Leck and ready to be surrendered to the British. In the foreground is 'White 1' WNr. 120013 – the aircraft flown by Leutnant Rudolf Schmitt on May 4, 1945, when he claimed to have shot down an RAF Typhoon.





**ABOVE:** One of the pilots who flew the He 162 with JG 1 – Oberleutnant Wolfgang Wollenweber. He came close to shooting down an RAF Typhoon in the aircraft but his guns jammed at the critical moment.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** After Germany's capitulation, the Allies were amazed to discover the extent of facilities dedicated to production of the Luftwaffe's single-jet fighter. This is the Junkers facility in a former salt mine at Tarthun, near Egeln.

**RIGHT:** One of the He 162s at Leck as seen from the rear.



were injured when their He 162s both crashed during ferry flights on April 26. Three more pilots crashed their He 162s during ferry flights on April 30. One of these, flown by Leutnant Hans Rechenberg of II./JG 1, was shot at by a Spitfire before it went down near Wismar.

On May 1, Oberleutnant Wollenweber and his men had to detach the final two He 162s from their construction jigs at Rostock before they could be ferried to Leck. After attempting and failing to get them to work, Wollenweber, two other pilots and an engineer were forced to escape the airfield in a Fieseler Storch as the advancing Russians threatened to overrun the facility.

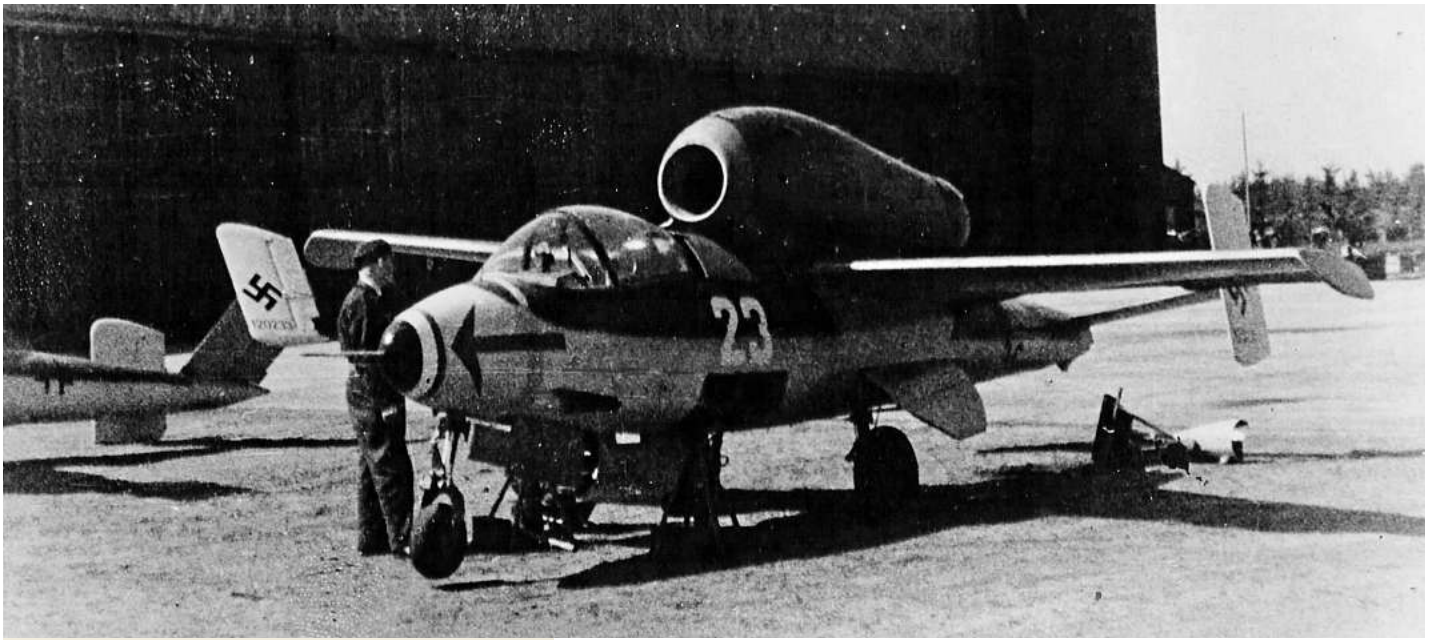
JG 1 now had around 45 He 162s stationed at Leck but since the airfield was one of the few places left in Germany where aircraft could operate relatively freely, it was now becoming crowded with a variety of other units and aircraft.

On May 4, the war diary of JG 4 recorded: "Orders arrive at 0200 – the serviceable aircraft must fly on, either to Norway or the Protectorate, to avoid being captured by British troops. Take-offs should be completed by 0600. The three Bf 109s of the former III./JG 4 are to remain at Leck. German forces in north Germany have signed a surrender, capitulating to Montgomery.

"It is forbidden to fire at any low-flying aircraft. At the same time no further take-offs are authorised. A lone Spitfire circled the airfield. The war is over! The Helferinnen Dobner and Augsen arrived on the airfield after an incredible journey. They are the only two service-women from their convoy that have been able to reach us here at Leck."

Seemingly undaunted by all this, Leutnant Rudolf Schmitt took off in He 162A-2 'White 1' at 11.38am and flew south. He was attempting to intercept RAF Typhoons that had been reported in the area and it wasn't long before, at 11.45am, he found an Allied aircraft south-east of the airfield at Husum.





**ABOVE:** Heinkel He 162A-2 WNr. 120230 'White 23' is believed to have been the personal aircraft of JG 1's commander, Oberst Herbert Ihlefeld. It was captured at Leck by the British but then turned over to the Americans.



**ABOVE AND LEFT:** After its transfer to the US, 'White 23' was given Foreign Equipment number FE-504 and an erroneous new tail number, 120222, and after undergoing a few tests was shown as a static display at air shows across America. It is now in storage at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC.

During a brief encounter, Schmitt opened fire and later recorded in his logbook: "Typhoon wirksam beschossen" or "Typhoon fired on with effect". This would seem to indicate that Schmitt believed he had fatally damaged a Typhoon fighter-bomber, though had not necessarily witnessed its final destruction.

The only corresponding Allied loss in about the right area and at anything like the right time was that of Flying Officer Tom M Austin's Hawker Tempest JN877 SA-Y. Austin, of 486 Squadron, crash-landed after suffering what he described as engine trouble in the Satrup area – though the 'trouble' did cause it to blow up.

Satrup was a good 20 miles east from Husum and perhaps seven or eight miles north of it. In addition,

Austin is believed to have gone down at around 7.10am. Nevertheless, in the confusion of those final days of the war, the possibility remains that Austin was indeed the one and only combat victim of a He 162.

It is believed that, in the end, some 171 He 162s were built, with 116 actually being delivered. The Luftwaffe received 56 of these before production finally collapsed at the end of April. At least nine men had been killed in flying accidents involving the He 162 – whether due to a failed airframe, a failed engine, inherent design flaws or simply the sheer trickiness of piloting the delicate little aircraft.

Whether Rudolf Schmitt actually managed to shoot down an Allied aircraft with a He 162 may never be known for certain. ●



**ABOVE:** A rare view of the He 162 in flight – in this case captured He 162A-2 WNr. 120098, which was given the serial VH513 in British service. It is pictured here at RAF Farnborough in mid to late 1945.