

BLUE ON BLUE



THE GLOSTER METEOR & THE 1955 REVOLUTION IN ARGENTINA

In 1955 Argentina was rocked by two attempts to overthrow President Juan D. Perón, whose regime had descended into a brutal dictatorship. Latin American aviation historian **SANTIAGO RIVAS** describes how the Meteors of the *Fuerza Aérea Argentina* played a very active part in both attempts — on both sides . . .



Argentina became the first export customer for the Gloster Meteor when it ordered 100 F.4s in May 1947, the first 50 to be examples from RAF stocks, the remainder to be provided new from the factory. The first arrived at Buenos Aires by ship that July. The last, I-100, delivered in July 1949, is seen here at Base Aérea Comandante Espora, south of Bahía Blanca, in the late 1950s.



AT THE END of the Second World War, Argentina, where German influence had traditionally been very strong, found itself in the beneficial position of having largely retained its neutrality throughout the conflict, although it had supplied Britain with regular shipments of valuable livestock, which avoided attack by German U-boats owing to the Argentinian ships' neutrality. After the war, Britain repaid part of its debt to Argentina by agreeing to the delivery of state-of-the-art weaponry, including 100 Gloster Meteor F.4s, 30 Avro Lincolns and 15 Lancasters from 1947, making the newly-minted *Fuerza Aérea Argentina* (FAéA — Argentinian Air Force) the most powerful air arm in Latin America.

By 1955 about 50 of the Meteors were still operational with the *VII Brigada Aérea* (7th Air Brigade), based at *Base Aérea Militar* (BAM — Military Air Base) Morón on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. By this time, the political situation in Argentina had become very tense, owing to a growing economic crisis exacerbated by the unpopular government of *General* Juan D. Perón, whose strongarm tactics to retain power were dividing the nation.

A FAILED COUP

On June 16, 1955, a military coup organised by anti-Perónist factions within the Argentinian armed forces, including the *Aviación Naval*

(AN — Naval Aviation) and parts of the FAéA, was launched in an attempt to overthrow the President. The coup would see the first air combat in the skies over Buenos Aires.

At 1240hr four Navy Beechcraft AT-11s and 15 North American AT-6A Texans bombed the Casa Rosada, the President's official residence in the capital, believing that Perón was in the building. Receiving information that aircraft were incoming from BAM Punta Indio, 100 miles (165km) south-east of Buenos Aires, to bomb the capital, the loyalist elements of the FAéA issued an order to scramble four Meteors from Morón. These included I-039, with *Primer Teniente* (1st Lt) Juan García at the controls; I-077 flown by Pr Tte Mario Olezza; I-090 (Pr Tte Osvaldo Rosito) and I-063 flown by *Teniente* (Lt) Ernesto Adradas. Their mission was to intercept anything flying over the city and, if necessary, shoot down any aircraft that showed hostile intentions.

A few minutes later two more Meteors, including I-032, flown by *Capitán* Jorge Mones Ruiz, took off from Morón. However, these were coup sympathisers, and were tasked with flying over the capital on a combat air patrol. Another section took off from Morón shortly afterwards, commanded by Pr Tte Juan Carlos Carpio, this cadre also supporting the coup.

After bombing the Casa Rosada, the Navy aircraft landed at Ezeiza Airport, south-west of Buenos Aires, from where rebel operations continued. After having flown over the smoking

OPPOSITE PAGE A *Fuerza Aérea Argentina* (FAéA) captain in full flying gear poses in the cockpit of his Meteor F.4. By 1955 President Juan Perón's increasingly repressive grip on power had begun to create divisions within the Argentinian military, leading ultimately to an attempted coup that June. PHOTOGRAPHS VA AUTHOR UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED



LEFT President Juan Domingo Perón enjoying his inauguration in Buenos Aires on June 4, 1946. Perón, a former soldier and military attaché to Chile, began his presidency on a wave of working-class optimism, vowing to make Argentina the leading economic force in South America and doing much to improve workers' rights — it was not to last.

BELOW More than 120 North American AT-6/SNJ-4s were operated by Argentina's Aviación Naval, the service acquiring its first mixed batch of refurbished AT-6As and SNJ-4s from American surplus stocks in 1947. Navy serial 0208/EAN-219 was originally an SNJ-4 and was struck off charge in 1970.

Casa Rosada, the four loyalist Meteors continued patrolling the capital. The weather was poor, with low-visibility conditions making the search for the rebel aircraft difficult. However, García spotted a pair of Navy Texans flying over the *Aeroparque 17 de Octubre*, the city's domestic airport (known after the removal of Perón as *Aeroparque Jorge Newbery*), about three miles (5km) from the Casa Rosada, and ordered his wingmen to follow him.

The Meteors formed an echelon and approached the Texans, which comprised AT-6B serial 0342, coded 3-A-29, commanded by *Teniente de Corbeta* (Sub-Lt) Máximo Rivero Kelly, and AT-6A serial 0352, coded 3-A-23, with *Guardiamarina* (Midshipman) Armando Román at the controls, both of which were on approach to the *Aeroparque* in order to land and refuel. Believing the Meteors were being flown by rebels (the majority of the pilots of VII *Brigada Aérea* had agreed to support the coup), the pilots of the Texans waggled their wings to

salute their comrades. The pilots of the Meteors did the same. As García drew closer, however, he opened fire on Rivero Kelly, but scored no hits. As the Meteors flashed past, Rivero Kelly put his Texan into a steep dive for the deck, pulling up just metres above a train bound for Tigre, a suburb of Buenos Aires. Near San Isidro, Rivero Kelly hauled his Texan up into a cloudbank and headed back to Ezeiza.

Meanwhile, Román's Texan was attacked by the other Meteors, although Olezza and Rosito directed their fire away from the Texan, being sympathetic to the coup-supporters' cause. Ádradas, in Meteor I-063, was loyal to the government, so took aim at the AT-6A and fired. The 20mm rounds hit the starboard side of the Texan and the wing caught fire. Román baled out into the Río de la Plata below.

A few minutes later loyalist *Viccomodoro* (Vice-Commodore) Carlos Sísler, chief of the VII *Brigada Aérea*'s *Escuadrón I*, took off from Morón in Meteor I-052 to attack the Navy





aircraft at Ezeiza airport. Alerted to the presence of anti-aircraft artillery, Síster performed his attack at low altitude and high speed. The Navy personnel believed that Síster was a supporter of the coup and made no efforts to defend the airfield until the fighter began firing on the aircraft on the ramp.

Having completed his first pass, Síster saw Rivero Kelly's Texan arriving at the airport and attacked, but without scoring any hits. Síster then undertook an attack on two transports — an AT-11 and a Consolidated Catalina — the latter returning machine-gun fire from the aircraft's gun position. On Síster's third pass the Meteor's cannon jammed, forcing a return to Morón. The ultimate result of the attack was damage to two airliners — one of Scandinavian Airlines System and the other belonging to *Aerolíneas Argentinas* — and one transport, Beechcraft AT-11 serial 0273, callsign 3-B-11.

STREET-LEVEL METEORS

Meanwhile, another group of rebel pilots took off from Morón. One of the primary missions of the rebel jet fighters was to attack local radio antennae and the Casa Rosada in support of Navy operations. The first to take off in this cadre was Tte Juan Boehler in I-019, with orders to destroy radio antennae, which he duly did.

At 1458hr an order was issued to prepare a joint attack with the AN on the Casa Rosada, this group taking off from 1551hr. The first wave of the attack was undertaken by AN Texans, AT-11s and Catalinas, the Meteors following low along Avenida Rivadavia, connecting BAM Morón to the Casa Rosada. Arriving at the Congress building a short distance west of the Casa Rosada, the Meteors descended to fly between the buildings of the Avenida de Mayo, arriving seconds later at the Plaza de Mayo,



TOP Following the failure of the attempted military coup in June 1955, four of the Meteors operated by the rebels escaped to neighbouring Uruguay, where I-094 is seen here being inspected by Fuerza Aérea Uruguaya (Uruguayan Air Force) personnel.

ABOVE The remains of an automobile after the rebel bombing of Plaza de Mayo in the centre of the capital during the June 1955 attempted coup. One pilot, Tte Guillermo Palacio, detached his Meteor's ventral fuel tank in flight, creating an effective napalm-type bomb.

where they opened fire on the Casa Rosada and the anti-aircraft artillery deployed there after the first attack. Teniente Guillermo Palacio used the ventral auxiliary fuel tank of his Meteor as a makeshift napalm bomb, destroying several cars parked near to the Casa Rosada. Similar attacks continued through the afternoon, the aircraft refuelling at Morón and returning to Plaza de Mayo. Radio antennae were attacked again, as were troops of the *Regimiento 3 de Infantería Motorizado* marching towards Ezeiza.

By the late afternoon of June 16, after heavy fighting in the capital, it had become clear that without the support of the Army and the bulk



THIS PAGE When the rebel FAéA Meteors landed at Montevideo in Uruguay in the wake of the failed June 1955 military coup, the Uruguayans had little first-hand experience of jet-powered fighter aircraft, its own most advanced fighter being the North American F-51 Mustang. Naturally, the Uruguayan Air Force made the most of the opportunity to explore the most modern military aircraft then in South America. The four Meteors that escaped to Uruguay — I-031, I-058, I-094 and I-098 — were all comprehensively inspected by the Uruguayans, as seen here, before being returned to Argentina the following month. The Uruguayans received their first jet aircraft in the shape of the Lockheed T-33 trainer in the late 1950s.





ABOVE A 1949 photograph of a group of FAéA pilots in front of an impressive line-up of the air arm's Meteors at Comandante Espora. The latter was one of the most active air bases during the *Revolución Libertadora* in September 1955, although none of the Meteors — rebel or loyalist — ever operated from it during the revolution.

of the FAéA, the attempted coup had run out of steam. The rebel Meteor pilots had no option but to escape with their mounts to neighbouring Uruguay, along with a number of other aircraft including a Fiat G.55, two Navy Douglas C-54s, seven Navy C-47s, three Catalinas, four AT-11s and 11 Texans. During their escape flights Meteors I-058, I-064 and I-098, flown by Lts Marelli and Jeannot and Capt Carús respectively, were used to attack the Police Central Department and the Casa Rosada again.

Six Meteors escaped to Uruguay, but Jeannot in I-064 had to ditch in the Río de la Plata near the coast when he ran out of fuel, and Meteor I-029 made a forced landing in a rural area with the undercarriage retracted. The four remaining escaped aircraft were returned to Argentina in the hands of loyalist pilots the following month.

THE REVOLUCIÓN LIBERTADORA

Three months later, on September 16, a second coup was staged, much bigger and with far more popular support. The Meteors were to fight on both sides again. Although personnel at BAM Morón remained loyal to the government, the *Fábrica Militar de Aviones* (FMA — Military Aircraft Factory) at Córdoba in north-central

Argentina was in possession of three Meteors for repairs — serials I-043, I-061 and I-079 — which would be used by the rebels, at that time in control of the FMA and the *Escuela de Aviación Militar* (EAM — Military Aviation School).

These three Meteors would see action during the morning of September 16, with a show of strength over troops of the Army Artillery School, which was also in the hands of the rebels. Under attack by loyalist soldiers from the nearby Infantry School, the Army Artillery School troops had little armament, so the Meteors, along with some Percival Prentices, AT-11s and IAé DL-22 trainers of the EAM, flew low over the Infantry School soldiers to intimidate them. Although the three Meteors initially had no armament or gunsights, the rebel technicians worked hard to fit two of the type's four 20mm cannon and gunsights on each. The FMA test pilots involved in this action were Pr Ttes Rogelio Balado and Alberto Herrero, led by Capt Suárez, who were joined shortly thereafter by Pr Ttes Hellmuth Weber, Luis Morandini and Rossi.

The next action would involve Meteors on the loyalist side, when it was decided to attack the old destroyers *ARA Cervantes* (T-1) and *ARA La Rioja* (T-4) of the rebel *Fuerza Naval de*

Meteor I-066 taxiing at an airfield some time after the September 1955 revolution, but still bearing the somewhat crude markings applied by hand to the aircraft by the rebels. The "I" designation was originally applied to denote "Interceptor", but when the type was modified in the late 1950s to carry rockets and bombs for the ground-attack role, the designation was changed to "C" for Caza (Fighter). Thus I-066 became C-066.



RIGHT *The ARA La Rioja in March 1955. An elderly Mendoza-class destroyer built for the Argentinian Navy by J. Samuel White in Cowes on the Isle of Wight in 1929, the rebel-controlled La Rioja was heavily damaged during maritime strikes by loyalist Meteors during the revolution, on September 16, 1955.*

Instrucción (Instruction Naval Force), which were blockading the Río de la Plata. In the early morning *Capitán de Fragata* (Commander) Hugo Crexell received a direct order from President Perón to co-operate with the FAéA on an attack on the rebel ships. Accordingly he visited VII Brigada Aérea and was taken on a reconnaissance flight over the river.

At 0900hr four Meteors commanded by Vicecomodoro Síster took off from Morón to attack the rebel destroyers, aboard which personnel had prepared the ships' three 40mm Bofors double-barrelled anti-aircraft cannon to greet the twin-engined fighters. At 0930hr the Meteors climbed and dived over the *La Rioja*, firing with their cannon. The ship returned fire, but with little effect. The ship was damaged by the four jets, two of which were fired on by the artillery of the *Cervantes*, which was approaching to defend the *La Rioja*. Shortly afterwards, three more Meteors, commanded by Vicecomodoro Pérez Laborda, took off to attack the two destroyers, all scoring hits and all returning to base safely.

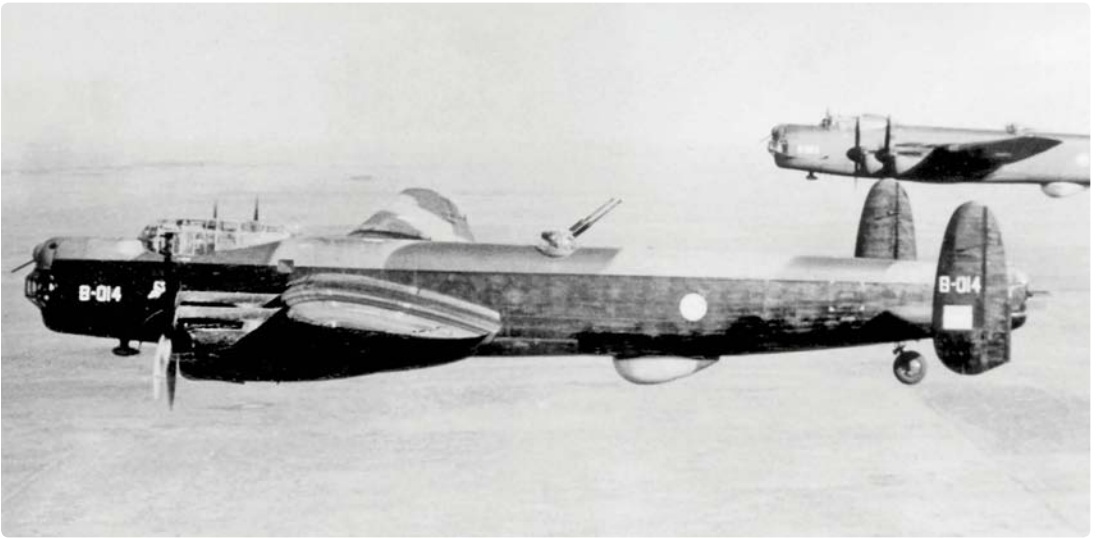
The next loyalist attack was undertaken against two Infantry Landing Ships (Nos 6 and 11) which were crossing the river from Martín García Island, home to the rebel-held *Escuela de Marinería* (Maritime College), to reinforce the rebel Naval School base at Río Santiago near the city of La Plata. Four Meteors, along with five IAé-24 Calquin twin-piston-engined ground-attack aircraft, were dispatched to attack the ships. Medium Landing Ship No 1 was sent out from Río Santiago to support the vessels, but



also lacking anti-aircraft artillery, it too received fire from the loyalist aircraft. The attack was repeated minutes later, resulting in two rebel dead and several injured.

Back at Morón, Crexell began to plan the next series of attacks, explaining to the pilots that the best method was to attack the ships at low altitude and from an angle diagonal to the stern. The *Cervantes* and *La Rioja* were attacked for a third time at 1100hr, resulting in heavy casualties, including several killed. One of the guns of the *La Rioja* was hit, although the crew managed to keep firing after completing a repair. The rebel destroyers were attacked yet again near the mouth of the river, close to the southern Uruguayan coast, but this time suffered little damage, the strikes ceasing shortly afterwards.

Loyalist attention now turned to Río Santiago,



ABOVE The FAéA acquired 30 Avro Lincoln B.2s, again a mixture of ex-RAF and new-build aircraft (12 and 18 respectively) in 1947, to supplement its bomber force of Lancasters. The type entered service that year and operated with 1 Grupo de Bombardeo of V Brigada Aérea until the last example was retired in 1967.

which was subjected to attacks by Avro Lincolns, Calquins and Meteors. The only artillery at the base comprised the three double-cannon aboard patrol ships *ARA Murature* and *ARA King*. The attacks continued until nightfall. Meanwhile, back at Córdoba, the rebel Meteor pilots flew strike missions against the loyalists throughout the day.

METEOR VS LINCOLN

The following day, September 17, loyalist Meteors entered the action in Córdoba. Three aircraft were prepared at Las Higueras airport in Río Cuarto, south of Córdoba, to attack the airport at Pajas Blancas, north of the city, where the Meteors were to attack four rebel-operated Avro Lincolns. Before the loyalist Meteors took off, one of the rebel Lincolns bombed Las Higueras, destroying a Lancaster. One Meteor, reportedly flown by a pilot sympathetic to the rebel cause, was scrambled but did not intercept the bomber.

Preparations for the Meteor attack on Pajas Blancas were stepped up. The three fighters took off shortly after 1700hr and headed north at 435 m.p.h. (700km/h), approaching at low altitude between the mountains in order to reach a point to the north of the airport from which to

commence a north-south line-astern attack. On the ramp were three Lincolns, one of which, with a full load of bombs, was being refuelled. With a planned separation of 1,000m (3,300ft), the Meteors, led by *Mayor* Catalá, strafed the ramp, damaging the bombers, one seriously. Only one would fly again during the revolution. Having completed their mission, the Meteors then returned to Río Cuarto, but not before flying over rebel-held Córdoba. *Mayor* Aubone arrived back at Las Higueras with several bullet holes in his Meteor, the result of Capt Domínguez flying too close behind him during the attack.

Another strike was prepared immediately, but a column of rebel troops was spotted heading towards Río Cuarto, and Las Higueras was evacuated. The Meteor pilots escaped in an AT-11 that was intercepted by a rebel Calquin, but managed to escape with little damage. The Meteors remained at Las Higueras, but took no further part in the action.

On the night of September 17, rebel Meteors

The FAéA's Meteors retained a natural-metal finish during the revolution, the rebels applying hand-painted symbols including the letter "V" with a cross above it, denoting "Cristo vence" – "Christ wins" – symbolising their support for the Catholic church, which opposed Perón. Loyalist Meteors had a "V" with a "P" for "Perón". Artwork by TIM BROWN © 2017





LEFT Rebel groundcrew members pose with a Meteor at Córdoba during the Revolución. The "MR" lettering applied to the forward fuselage stands for Movimiento Revolucionario — "Revolutionary Movement".

BELOW Following the conclusion of the Revolución on September 21, 1955, a victory parade was organised for the following day, to include a flypast by FAéA aircraft, including the IAé-33 Pulqui II and Meteors seen here being prepared at the FMA.

from the FMA in Córdoba, flown by Rogelio Balado and Hellmuth Weber, attacked loyalist anti-aircraft artillery units approaching Córdoba from the east. Although the Meteors were damaged, they remained in service.

Combat continued on the 18th with a bombing mission undertaken by two loyalist Lincolns from Morón against the EAM in Córdoba. Weber took off from the FMA airfield in one of the rebel Meteors when the bombers attacked the runway at the nearby FMA, intercepting the Lincolns and firing on one of them, but without hitting it. The bombers separated and Weber positioned himself behind one of them to attack it from below, but his cannon jammed and he was forced to return to the FMA airfield.

Another Meteor, flown by Balado, took off from the FMA to intercept the other bomber, which was continuing its raid. The bombs from the Lincoln fell close to the runway while Balado was taking off, but he managed to get airborne. After attempting, to no avail, to convince the bomber crew to join the revolution, Balado made a series of very close passes and threatened to

fire, eventually convincing the bomber crew to return to Morón.

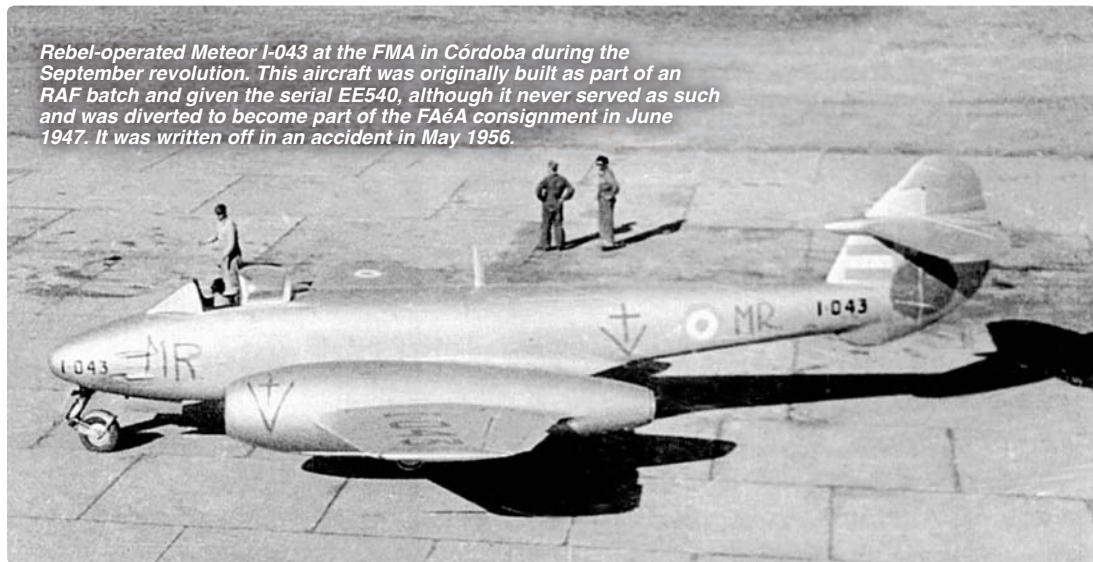
On September 19 loyalist troops launched an attack on Córdoba from the north-east, occupying the northern train station. The rebels launched a counter-attack using napalm-equipped Calquins and Meteors, the latter being modified to carry two Calquin napalm tanks on underwing racks. The opposing artillery was intense, but the Meteor pilots managed to hit their targets, dropping not only the napalm but their ventral fuel tanks too, as Guillermo Palacio had done during the failed coup of June 16. The Meteors suffered with frequent cannon problems, however, owing to poor maintenance; one of the Meteors was fitted with two 20mm cannon from the dorsal turret of a Lincoln. The Meteor attacks did not stop the loyalist advance on Córdoba, but they did weaken the opposition and provide more time.

By the end of September 19 President Perón had realised that Argentina was on the brink of a destructive civil war, and he established a military government to negotiate with the rebels

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Rebel-operated Meteor I-043 at the FMA in Córdoba during the September revolution. This aircraft was originally built as part of an RAF batch and given the serial EE540, although it never served as such and was diverted to become part of the FAéA consignment in June 1947. It was written off in an accident in May 1956.



for a ceasefire. As a result, the fighting stopped, giving both sides time to reorganise their troops.

Detecting a significant movement of Perónist troops south-west of Córdoba, the rebels launched a pre-emptive attack, deeming the movement a violation of the ceasefire. By this time supplies of jet fuel (Avtur) at the FMA had been exhausted, so normal fuel (Avgas) was used instead. The Gloster manuals stated that the latter could be used for short periods but that combat should be avoided in this situation.

Two Meteors were prepared at the FMA on the 19th for a mission making firing passes over the loyalist troops to stop their advance. The first Meteor, flown by Hellmuth Weber, took off shortly after 1200hr. The second Meteor, I-079, flown by Tte Luis Alberto Morandini, took off when Weber returned after having made several passes over the loyalists. When Morandini was returning to the FMA to land, one of the Meteor's engines stopped, probably owing to the use of the unsuitable fuel, and the aircraft stalled and crashed. Morandini was the only Meteor pilot to die during the revolution.

A NEW REGIME

On September 21 the fight ceased definitively and the rebels declared victory after Perón resigned and fled to Paraguay. The following day a victory parade was held in Córdoba, in which the Meteors that had taken part in the *Revolución Libertadora* (Liberation Revolution), as it was known, flew with others from Buenos Aires in the hands of rebel pilots that had been unable to join in the coup.

Calquins, Lincolns, DL-22s, Prentices and one of the six Kurt Tank-designed IAé-33 Pulqui II prototype jet fighters also participated. The final participation of the Meteors was when two examples escorted the Aerolíneas Argentinas

DC-3 of Gen Eduardo Lonardi, leader of the revolution, to Buenos Aires, where Lonardi was to take the reins of the government.

These two significant milestones in Argentina's history — one a failed coup attempt and the other a nation-changing revolution — had seen the first combat operations of the FAéA's Meteors, which, during the June 16 coup attempt, earned the dubious distinction of having undertaken the largest aerial attack on the country's mainland. The rebel Meteors had operated in difficult conditions during the *Revolución Libertadora* but played a major part in overthrowing the Perón regime.



GLOSTER METEOR F.4 DATA

Powerplant 2 x 3,500lb-thrust Rolls-Royce Derwent turbojet engines

Dimensions

Span	37ft 2in	(11.3m)
Length	41ft 0in	(12.49m)
Height	13ft 0in	(3.9m)
Wing area	350ft ²	(32.5m ²)

Weights

Empty	11,217lb	(5,088kg)
Loaded	14,545lb	(6,597kg)

Performance

Maximum speed (clean config) at 10,000ft (3,050m)	580 m.p.h.	(933km/h)
Climb to 30,000ft (9,150m)	6min	
Service ceiling	44,500ft	(13,563m)

Armament

4 x fixed forward-firing British Hispano 20mm cannon mounted in front fuselage sides with 780 rounds of ammunition