

TOPPLING 'D'

AIR CDRE GRAHAM PITCHFORK LOOKS AT THE RAF'S FIRST JET 'OPS'

Below
Dennis Barry with his
Meteor F.III.

Instructions were received that the unit was being re-equipped with a 'secret' aircraft. It was April 1944 and Sqn Ldr Lionel Watts DFC, the commanding officer of 616 (South Yorkshire) Auxiliary Air Force Squadron, was left wondering what was going on. The unit, based at Fairwood Common in South Wales, had been in existence for a mere six years and always flown high-altitude Supermarine Spitfire VIIIs.

On May 26, Watts and Fg Off Mike Cooper, one of the unit's most experienced pilots and the survivor of 3 bale-outs and a walk home through France, Spain and Gibraltar, left for Farnborough. There they discovered that the 'secret' was the Rolls-Royce Welland-powered Meteor jet.

The following morning the two pilots arrived at the dispersal to find two prototype FIs (EE213 and EE214) being prepared for flight. After a briefing by Wg Cdr Willie Wilson, the CO of the Experimental Flight, they familiarised themselves with the cockpit layout. Each had two flights that day and two more the next.

After a week they returned to 616's new base at Culmhead in Somerset, just in time to fly their Spitfires

on a dawn D-Day beachhead patrol. During their absence a twin-engined Airspeed Oxford had been delivered to allow pilots to practice asymmetric ('engine-out') flying.

No.616 continued to fly Spitfires in support of the Normandy landings. At the same time, pilots were withdrawn in groups of five to begin conversion to the Meteor, with training carried out initially at Farnborough. It was decided that the squadron commander of the RAF's first jet squadron should be a wing commander, so Sqn Ldr Watts, was replaced by Wg Cdr Andrew McDowell DFM and Bar, who led the first group. A few days later the flight commander Sqn Ldr Dennis Barry led the second group. He thought the briefing was "rather sparse".

Each pilot completed five flights over a three-day period practicing single-engine flying and approaches on the third sortie. After this short conversion they returned to the squadron as fully qualified jet pilots.

HISTORY IS MADE

During July, No.616 moved to Manston, in Kent, which

was ideally situated to intercept the new German menace, the V-1 flying bomb or 'Doodlebugs' as they were called. On July 21 the first two Meteors, the non-operational EE213 and EE214, arrived. Five frontline aircraft soon followed and a concentrated period of converting the remaining pilots to the jet commenced. Within a week the programme was completed and on July 27 the first Flight section was declared operational on the Meteor.

A few days later the unit intelligence officer captured the mood by entering in the squadron record book: "Today the Meteors go into operation. History is made! The first British jet-propelled aircraft flies in defence of Britain against the flying bomb."

The privilege of flying the RAF's first jet operation fell to Canadian Fg Off 'Mac' McKenzie who took off at 14:30 hours for an uneventful patrol near Ashford. After a number of similar sorties on the first day flight commander Lionel Watts closed in on a V-1 flying bomb and was ready to register 616's first success...when his cannons jammed. Shortly afterwards, Fg Off 'Dixie' Dean was about to open fire on a V-1 when control instructed him to abort, as he was entering a balloon defended area.

The sight of Meteors over south



'OODLEBUGS'



Left Meteor F.I EE227 was delivered to No.616 straight off the production line in August 1944.

"The first British jet-propelled aircraft flies in defence of Britain against the flying bomb"

eastern England in early August created numerous, potentially serious, mis-identifications. Fg Off Ian Wilson was returning from a patrol when two Spitfires attacked his Meteor. They opened fire, causing serious damage to the elevators and forcing him to make an emergency landing using just the tailplane trim. It was impressive flying for someone with just a few hours' experience in jets.

Anti-aircraft gunners also had trouble identifying Meteors and when one was sent over the Thames Estuary, a message from Anti-Aircraft Command captured the mood: "A Meteor aircraft will be patrolling for identification purposes only – repeat, identification purposes only."

TIPPING THE BALANCE

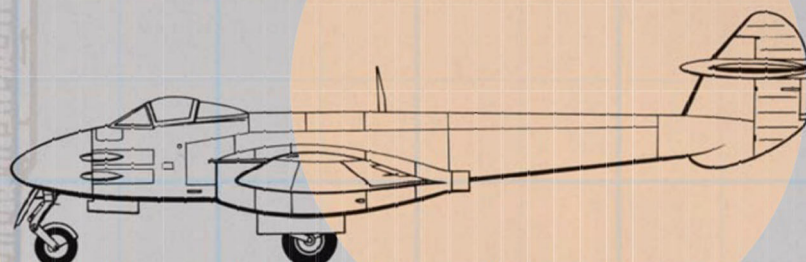
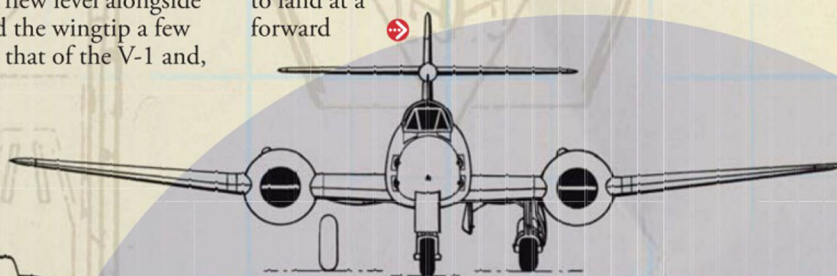
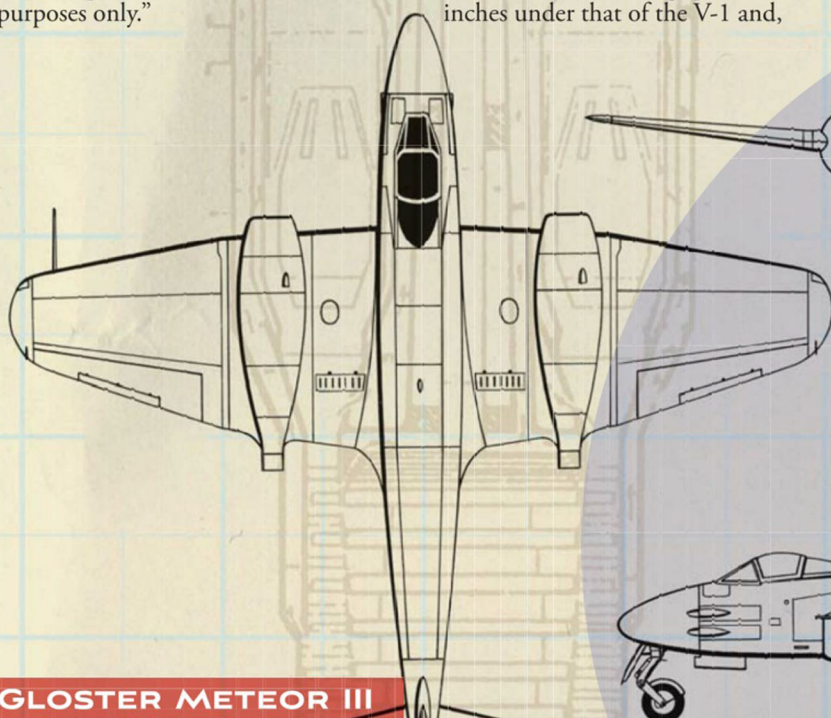
Over the next few days No.616 made many more V-1 sightings but problems with the cannons continued to frustrate the pilots. Finally, on August 4, the squadron achieved its first success. During the afternoon Fg Off 'Dixie' Dean was flying at 4,500ft (1,371m), under the control of Biggin Hill (call-sign *Kingsley 11*), when he spotted a flying bomb near Tonbridge and dived in pursuit.

At 450mph (724km/h) he soon caught up with the V-1 and attacked from dead astern. But his four 20mm cannons jammed as he tried to open fire. He flew level alongside and manoeuvred the wingtip a few inches under that of the V-1 and,

as he banked away sharply, sent the flying bomb diving to destruction. It was the RAF's first jet 'kill'.

Within minutes of this first success Fg Off J K Rodger achieved a more conventional victory when two short bursts of his cannons destroyed a flying bomb near Tenterden. The squadron's V-1 score soon started to mount. On August 7, Dean's cannons worked perfectly and he brought down his 2nd flying bomb, followed 3 days later by a third.

By mid-August 616 Squadron was an all-Meteor unit equipped with 14 of the original 20 F.Is. But tragedy struck on August 15 when F/Sgt D A Gregg was killed as he attempted to land at a forward



GLOSTER METEOR III

616 SQUADRON METEOR WRITE-OFFS

Date	Mk	Serial	Details
Aug 15, 1944	Mk.I	EE226	Stalled on approach to Ashford airstrip; F/Sgt D A Gregg killed
Aug 17, 1944	Mk.I	EE224	Damaged accidentally by cannon fire from EE225 on the ground at Manston
Aug 29, 1944	Mk.I	EE222	Force-landed in Kent, not repaired
Apr 29, 1945	Mk.III	EE252	Collided with EE273 over Germany; Sqn Ldr L W Watts killed
Apr 29, 1945	Mk.III	EE273	Collided with EE252 over Germany; F/Sgt B Cartmell killed



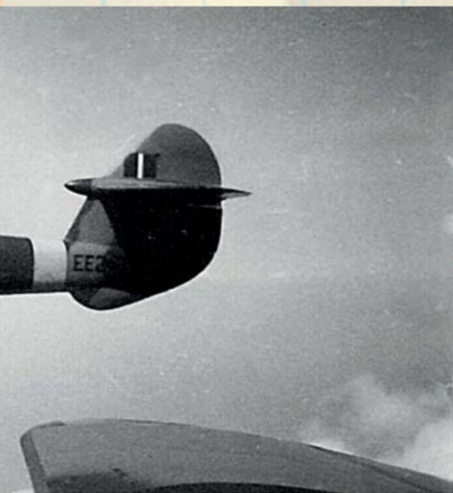
Above While serving with 616 Squadron Mk.I EE227 suffered a collapsed undercarriage at Debden in October 1944. It survived to become an engine test-bed for Rolls-Royce (illustrated).
KEY COLLECTION

airstrip at Great Chart, near Ashford. The following day No.616 achieved two more successes when McKenzie used the 'wingtip method' to topple a bomb near Maidstone and Belgian pilot Fg Off Pru Mullenders shot one down near Ashford. The squadron destroyed three more bombs on the August 17, one each to W/O Syd Woodacre, F/Sgt Sam Easy and Canadian Fg Off Jack Ritch.



An engine change in process on a 616 Squadron Mk.I. The tail pipe is under the fuselage roundel. KEY COLLECTION





Centre left
Meteor F.III 'YQ-N',
possibly EE249, on charge
from February 1945.

Left
An F.III in the temporary
white scheme over
Belgium, in February
1945.

Below left
Gloster Meteor III EE274
of 616 Squadron in
Germany during April
1945. RAF MUSEUM

"...as he banked away sharply, he sent the flying bomb diving to destruction"

Further successes followed two days later when F/Sgt Watts shot down a bomb and Fg Off Hobson shared one with a Hawker Tempest pilot. Ten days later he shared another with squadron-mate F/Sgt Eddie Epps and, on August 29, the unit scored its last V-1 'kill' when Fg Off H Miller shot down a flying bomb near Sittingbourne, bringing the total to 13. The squadron continued to fly anti-V-1 patrols, but the capture of the launch sites in the Pas de Calais area of northern France saw a huge reduction in the use of flying bombs.

INTO EUROPE

With action scaled down following the demise of the

V-1s, No.616 spent much of its time demonstrating the new jet. An important detachment was mounted in early October to the USAAF airfield at Debden in Essex. The heavy bombers of the US Eighth Air Force had suffered serious losses to the Luftwaffe and the appearance of the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter had created increased problems. The Meteors flew simulated attacks against bomber formations enabling the USAAF to develop defensive tactics to combat the new threat.

During December, No.616 started to receive F.IIIIs, but the initial batch was fitted with the underpowered Welland due to the slow delivery

of the more potent Rolls-Royce Derwent. The first two (EE231 and EE232) were delivered on December 18 followed by three more on Christmas Eve and two on the 28th.

By mid-January the squadron transferred to 84 Group of the 2nd Tactical Air Force at Colerne, Wiltshire, in readiness for a move to the continent that started on January 20. Led by Sqn Ldr Dennis Barry, the first four flew into Melsbroek airfield (B-58), near Brussels. The aircraft were immediately painted white and tasked to fly over Allied lines at appointed times so troops would learn not to confuse them with



Right
Pilots of No.616 at Lübeck in June 1945. The CO, 'Smokey' Schrader is seated in the centre of middle row with Sqn Ldr Dennis Barry on his right.
ALL VIA AUTHOR UNLESS NOTED



"...the Storch landed and the pilot and passenger got out and ran away. Jennings destroyed the aircraft"

the Me 262s that were being used increasingly for ground attack missions.

Initially, No.616 was restricted to flying over Allied territory and the frustrated pilots did not see any action. On March 26 Dennis Barry moved his Flight to Gilze-Rijen (B-77), in Holland, and the remainder of the unit joined them from England during the following week.

In mid-April the Meteors were cleared to operate over enemy territory and the white-painted aircraft were returned to camouflage. The squadron was assigned to ground attack sorties, with the first being flown on April 16 from its new base at Kluis (B-91), near Nijmegen.

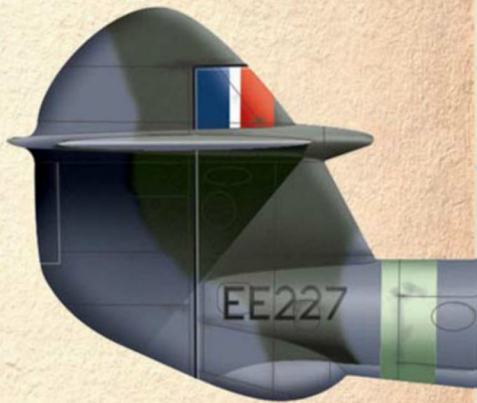
The following day the first success fell to Flt Lt Mike Cooper when he strafed and destroyed an enemy truck. Others followed but No.616 was soon on the move again and, on April 20, it was based on

German soil for the first time when it joined 83 Group's 122 Wing at Quackenbruck (B-109). Before the end of April there were two more moves, first to Fassberg (B-152) and then to Luneberg (B-156).

Tragedy struck on April 29 when long-serving flight commander Lionel Watts and F/Sgt B Cartmel took off for a reconnaissance sortie but collided as they climbed through the clouds. Both pilots were killed. Watts was replaced by the very experienced Sqn Ldr Tony Gaze DFC and Bar and Wg Cdr W E 'Smokey' Schrader DFC took over as the new squadron commander.

TRUCK BUSTING

The last two weeks of the war saw a great deal of activity for the squadron, with most attacks directed at German Army units as they retreated towards Schleswig-Holstein and the Danish border. The leading vehicles of a convoy were attacked, halting those behind



and making them an easy targets. On May 2 over 20 vehicles were destroyed and almost 100 were damaged.

The following day the new CO, with Flt Lt Tony Jennings as his No.2, made a surprise attack against the airfield at Schonberg. They

Below
A Meteor F.III on the ground at Lübeck, with Typhoons behind.



The Rolls-Royce Derwent jet engine

This engine was a development by Rolls-Royce of the original Whittle engine, was used to power the Gloster Meteor fighter and is a good example of a centrifugal-flow turbojet from the era of early jet aircraft

How it works

- 1 The impeller turns, drawing air in from the atmosphere and forcing it into the compressor
- 2 The pressurised air enters the combustion chamber where it is mixed with fuel and ignited.
- 3 The expanded gases escape via the exhaust at a higher speed than they entered the engine. Following Newton's 3rd law of motion the reaction to this increase is the thrust that pushes the engine through the air
- 4 Some of the power from the exhaust gases is harnessed to drive a turbine which provides the power to turn the impeller.

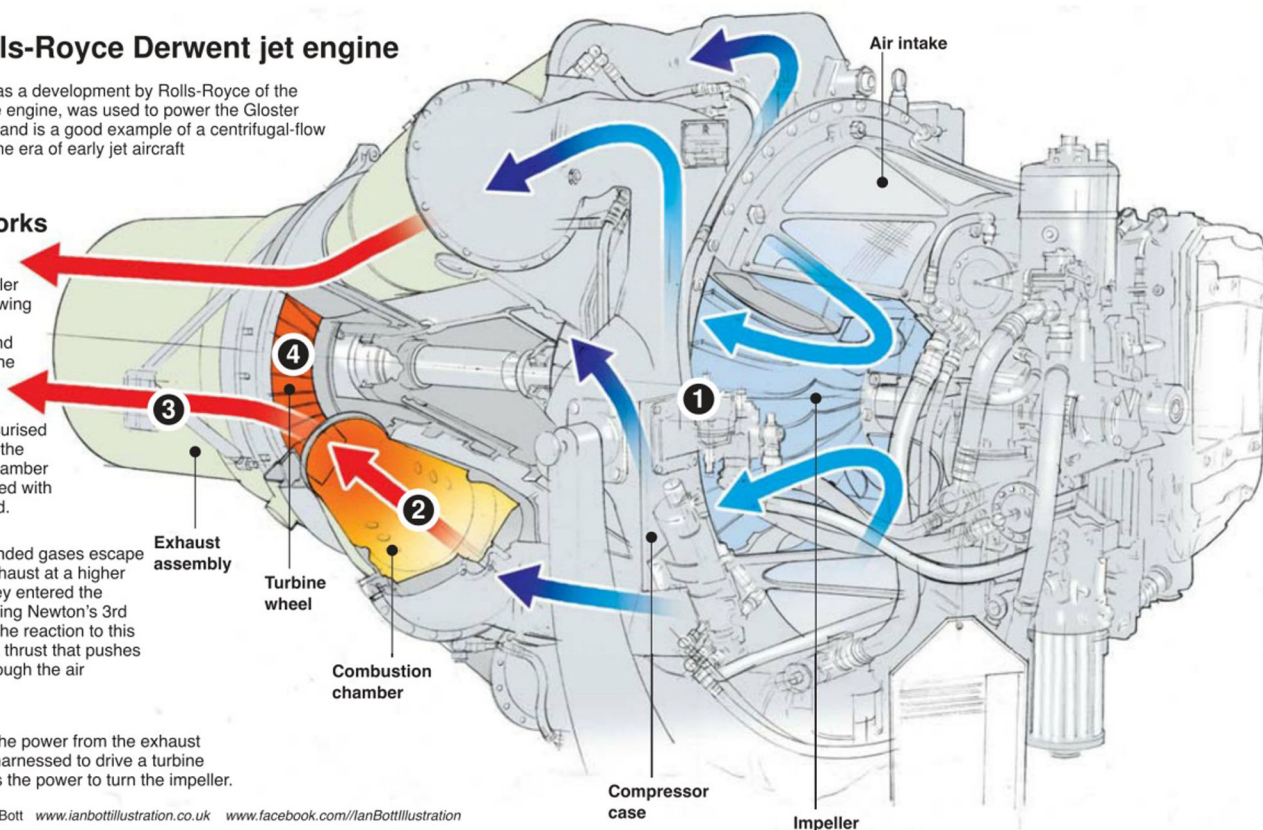
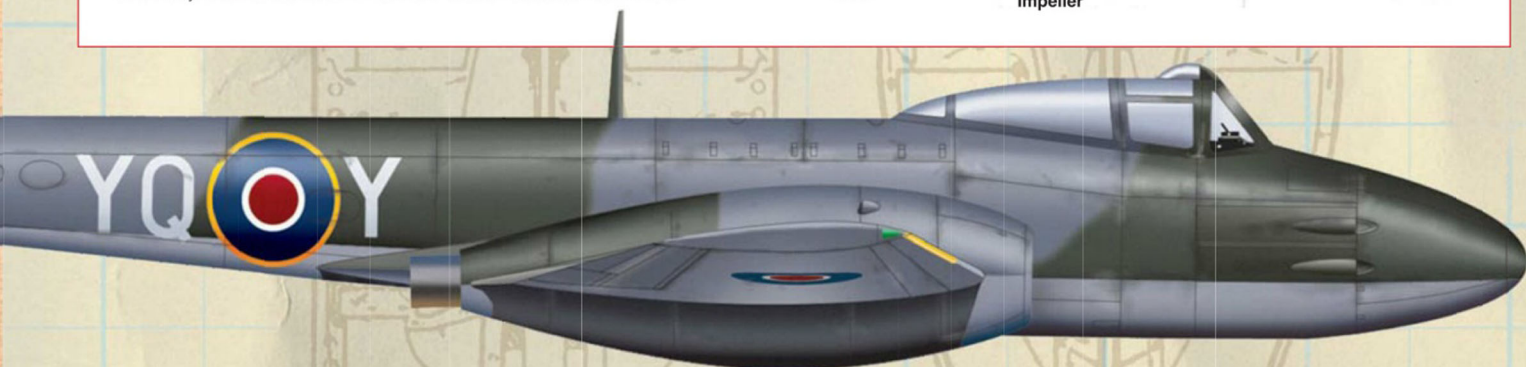


Illustration by Ian Bott www.ianbottillustration.co.uk www.facebook.com/IanBottIllustration



strafed and destroyed two Heinkel He 111s, two Junkers Ju 87s and a Messerschmitt Bf 109.

On the return to base, Jennings spotted and attacked a Fieseler Fi 156 Storch whose pilot countered his attacks repeatedly and skilfully by turning towards him as he reached firing range, preventing him from getting a good position. During one of the Meteor's turns the Storch landed and the pilot and passenger got out and ran away. Jennings destroyed the aircraft.

Suddenly, the war was over and the squadron moved to its last base at Lübeck (B-158). Here, crews underwent intensive training in preparation for a series of victory flypasts, including one attended by Soviet commander Marshal Georgy Zhukov at Frankfurt when 12 Meteors took to the sky. On July 1 eleven Meteors, led by Sqn Ldr Dennis Barry, took part in the

Victory Airshow at Kastrup, near Copenhagen, in the presence of Queen Ingrid.

Sqn Ldr Tony Gaze gave a superb solo aerobatic display and Sid Woodacre made a spectacular high speed pass low over the huge crowd. The next day No.616 returned to Lübeck and Dennis Barry reported: "The local population was well informed of our departure since I was able to look up at the spire of the city hall as I led a formation of 12 aircraft over the city."

Two months after its spectacular performance over Copenhagen the sad news arrived that No.616 was not to survive the post-war rundown. On August 31 it was re-numbered 263 Squadron and left for Acklington in Northumberland.

No.616 (South Yorkshire) Auxiliary Air Force Squadron was the only Allied unit to operate jets during World War Two. While

the pilots rejoiced at the end of hostilities, celebrations were tinged with slight regret that they had not been able to use the Meteor to greater effect.

The jet had been rushed into service when, in fact, much more development was still necessary, not least on the engines and the cannons. The pilots had also only been given a very short time to convert from the single-engine, tail-wheel Spitfire to the twin-engine Meteor.

The jet was effective against the V-1 threat and in the ground attack role during the hectic final phase of the war, but its speed and high ceiling were not exploited. The real test, against the Luftwaffe's jet fighters, never came. Nevertheless, by the end of the war the Meteor was well-established and the rapid re-equipment of Fighter Command was possible. ●

Above
Meteor I EE227 'YQ-Y' of
616 Squadron, circa July
1944. PETE WEST