

Battling the Jets

In the closing weeks of the Second World War, the Griffon-engine Supermarine Spitfires of 41 Squadron, along with other Allied units, found themselves entering a transitional period in the history of aerial conflict. As Andrew Thomas reveals, not only did they encounter some of the *Luftwaffe*'s jet aircraft, they also had several successes.

As 1945 opened it found 41 Squadron based in north-eastern Belgium at Ophoven, a Pierced-Steel Planking (PSP) strip near the town of As. Part of the Second Tactical Air Force's 125 Wing, the squadron was commanded by Squadron Leader Douglas Benham, an Ace from the fighting in North Africa. One of the RAF's most successful squadrons, 41 Squadron had been equipped with the Spitfire since 1939. Indeed, as the war entered its last few months, it found itself operating one of the latest variants – the superlative Spitfire XIV.



ABOVE: By Mark Postlethwaite GAvA, this painting depicts Squadron Leader John Shepherd of 41 Squadron, flying a Spitfire XIV, shooting down the Messerschmitt Bf 110 that was towing a Me 163 near Nordholz airfield on 14 April 1945. The Me 163's pilot survived, managing to crash land; Werner Nelte, flying the Bf 110, was killed. (Courtesy of Mark Postlethwaite; www.posart.com)

MARK POSTLETHWAITE '07



ABOVE LEFT: It was whilst flying the right-hand of these Spitfire XIVs, SM826 (EB-B), on 14 April 1945, that Squadron Leader Shepherd shot down Nelte's Bf 110. The nearer aircraft is MV260. (Via C.F. Shores)

ABOVE RIGHT: Werner Nelte's final resting place in the Brockeswalde war cemetery at Cuxhaven. (Cuxhaven Council)

BELOW: Flying Officer Eric Gray, an Australian, made 41 Squadron's first claim against a jet when he damaged a Messerschmitt Me 262 over Rheine on Valentine's Day 1945. (D.S.V. Rake)



Probably the best low-level interceptor available to the Allies, the Spitfire XIV was equipped with a Griffon 65 engine of 2,200hp. The XIV could be fitted with either a B-wing carrying a pair of 20mm cannon and four .303 Browning machine-guns, or the E-wing in which the latter were replaced by .50 calibre Browning machine-guns. Thus fitted, and with a full fuel load, the XIV's weight at take-off was 8,400lbs. It was whilst flying these potent aircraft during the closing weeks of the war that the squadron was to regularly encounter *Luftwaffe* jets over north-west Germany.

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Among the pilots who flew the Griffon-engine Spitfires with 41 Squadron was

Flight Lieutenant Derek Rake, a pilot who had previously flown Merlin-engine variants in the Mediterranean. Rake recalled the difference: "The take off in the Mk.XIV was a bit different to the earlier Merlin-powered Spits in that the power of the Griffon meant that you had to use full rudder and even aileron to counteract the torque and so stay on the narrow PSP strips on takeoff. It was always comforting to me to know that the increased power of the Griffon would enable me to turn inside and/or out-climb the Me 109s and Fw 190s."

As the end of the fighting in Europe drew closer, 41 Squadron flew armed reconnaissance missions, attacking targets of opportunity on the ground and engaging enemy aircraft whenever they were seen. During one mission on 23 January the CO shot down a brace of Focke-Wulf Fw 190s to take his final total to eight destroyed. A few days later he led the squadron up to Volkel in Holland where it joined 122 Wing for a few weeks.

From here, it continued to send out sweeps across the shrinking territory of the Third Reich with patrols particularly targeting enemy-held airfields. At 08.30 hours on 14 February 1945, for example, five of 41's Spitfire XIVs found

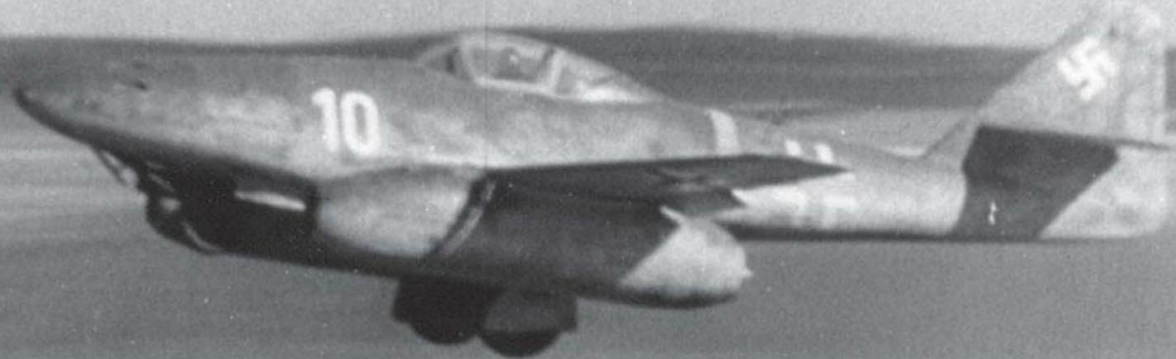
themselves over Rheine airfield which was the home of the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet-equipped *Kampfgeschwader* (J) 51 *Edelweiß*. As at all of its major jet bases, the *Luftwaffe* used conventional Bf 109 or Fw 190 units to cover the jets when they were at their most vulnerable during take-off or landing.

As they approached Rheine the Spitfire pilots spotted a dozen Fw 190s of I/JG 54 and several Me 262s in the circuit. They attacked immediately and hit a number of the enemy fighters with Flight Lieutenant Frank Wooley (in RM791/EB-V) probably destroying one of the long-nosed Fw 190D-9s, (nicknamed the "Dora", or "Long-Nose Dora"). Diving through the covering Focke-Wulfs, Flying Officer Eric Gray, who was flying RM885, and Warrant Officer Rossow (in RM696) each damaged one of the jets, though KG 51's Me 262s remained active throughout the day.

Shortly before dusk, Flight Lieutenant Tony Gaze, a 610 Squadron pilot who was also flying a Spitfire XIV, located more enemy jets, this time Arado 234 bombers, over the Dutch town of Nijmegen. He later recalled what followed:

"At about 16.30 hours I sighted an Arado 234 pulling up from attacking the Cleve area. I dropped my tank and





attempted to intercept but despite the fact that I cut the corner it pulled away easily at 7,000 ft.

"After this we continually chased Arados over this area. I fired at two without result. At about 17.00 hours, when it was apparent that the jets were diving down through the cloud which was

from 9-11,000 ft., I climbed up through it.

"I did an orbit at 13,000ft to clear off the ice on the windscreen and sighted 3 M.E. 262s in Vic formation passing below me at cloud top level. I dived down behind them and closed in, crossing behind the formation, and attacked the port aircraft which was lagging slightly.

"I could not see my sight properly as we were flying straight into the sun, but fired from dead astern, at a range of 350 yards, hitting it in the starboard jet with the second burst; at which the other 2 aircraft immediately dived into cloud. It pulled up slowly and turned to starboard and I fired obtaining more strikes on fuselage and jet which caught fire. The enemy rolled over on to its back and dived through cloud. I dived after it; on breaking cloud I saw an aircraft hit the ground and explode about a mile ahead of me." The other jet pilots opened their throttles and escaped.

Gaze duly claimed his first jet victory; it was not to be his last. The jet it had shot down, however, was in fact a Me 262A - 9K+NL of 3/KG 51. It was flown by *Feldwebel* Rudolf Hoffmann who was killed.

A couple of weeks later it was 41 Squadron's turn to claim its first jet when, shortly after 07.00 hours on 2 March 1945, Flight Lieutenant Johnny Reid and Flight Sergeant Key were scrambled from Volkell and ordered to patrol Nijmegen where enemy jet activity had been reported.

About thirty minutes after take-off, ground control then vectored Reid and Key towards the town

ABOVE: A Messerschmitt Me 262, White 10, photographed at the point of take-off; note the flap setting. These capable jets were at their most vulnerable when taking-off and landing. (ww2images)

LEFT: The first Arado Ar 234 destroyed was brought down near Enschede by Flying Officer Danny Reid. (Author's Collection)

BELOW: Flight Lieutenant Tony Gaze shot down a Me 262 whilst flying with 610 Squadron, following which he then shared in the destruction of an Arado Ar 234 bomber with 41 Squadron. (Author's Collection)



of Weert in south-east Holland. Flying between thin layers of cloud they saw nothing so they returned to Nijmegen where, coming out of cloud, Reid spotted an aircraft about a mile ahead of him and slightly above. He immediately gave chase as it headed to the north-east weaving very slightly. Reid kept in its rear hemisphere to avoid being spotted but was perplexed by its appearance. He was certain that it was a jet and was not either a Me 262 or a Meteor.

"I closed to 100 yards or less, firing with .5 M.G. and cannon whilst still overtaking," he recounted in his post-flight report. "I saw strikes on the port wing, port jet engine and fuselage. E/A immediately emitted dense clouds of brownish smoke, possibly jet exhaust. I continued firing and saw flashes in the smoke, breaking away at extremely close range, and being hit in the port radiator by debris. I next saw E/A going down in a wide spiral to starboard with white smoke or vapour pouring from holes all along the port wing, and dark smoke from the fuselage.

"I could then see the long nose of the a/c and the straight tapered wings with rounded tips and identified an Arado 234. A





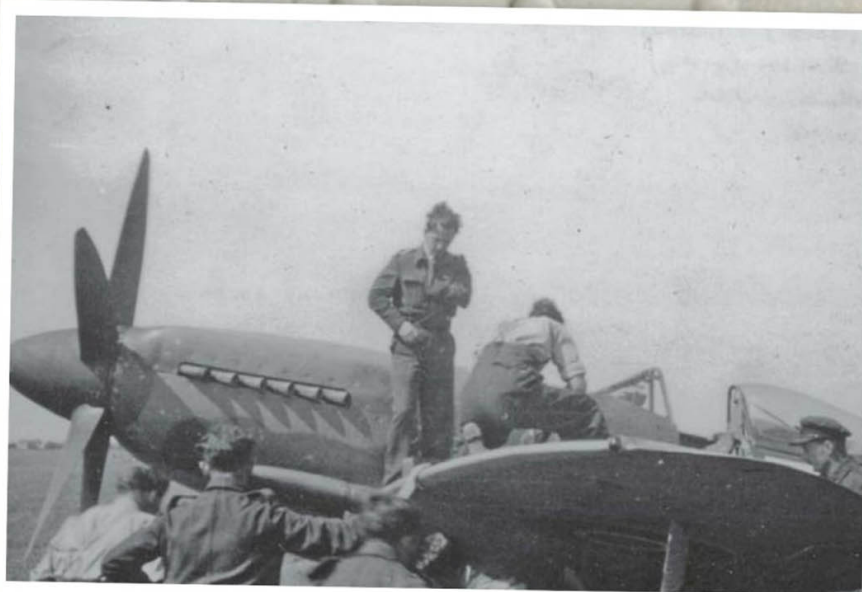
ABOVE LEFT: The destruction of 41 Squadron's second Ar 234 was shared by Flight Lieutenant Derek Rake who later claimed the unit's 200th victory of the war. (D.S.V. Rake)

ABOVE RIGHT: For the closing weeks of the Second World War, 41 Squadron was led by Squadron Leader John Shepherd (standing on wing) who was credited with the destruction of Werner Nelte's Bf 110 and the Komet it was towing. (D.S.V. Rake)

BELOW: An Arado Ar 234B-2, fitted with Jumo 004 jet engines, pictured at an airbase in Germany in early 1945. Two of these single-seat jet bombers were shot down by the Spitfires of 41 Squadron. (ww2images)

large piece suddenly flew off, and one person baled out, parachute opening. E/A steepened its dive and crashed somewhere near Enschede, being completely destroyed by explosion."

It transpired that in 41 Squadron's first confirmed victory over a jet Reid had brought down an aircraft of Achmer-based 9/KG 76. When he returned to base his success was the source of much good natured banter from the pilots of the other squadrons of the Wing that flew the



Tempest. The French Ace Pierre Clostermann recounted the event in his memoir, *The Big Show*:

"We got the remainder of the story that evening in the bar, when the pilots of 41 were distinctly pleased with themselves and let nobody forget it. Flying Officer Johnny Reid DFC, shortly after he had scrambled and as he was patrolling Nijmegen bridge at 10,000 feet, had spotted one of the very latest and rarest Luftwaffe planes – an Arado 234 – sneaking into our lines at ground level.

"Diving straight down, flat out, ignoring the risk of his wings coming off, Johnny succeeded in catching the b***** in a turn, fired at him point blank and gently landed him in flames less than 100 yards from Broadhurst's HQ at Eindhoven.

"We were told that the AOC was delighted, as a group of American journalists had witnessed the operation, and it was the first Arado 234 to be destroyed for certain. After this episode the pilots of 41 revived the good old Spitfire v Tempest controversy, and pursued us with their jeers."

Shortly afterwards, 41 Squadron returned to the UK for an Armament Practice Camp at Warmwell. When it returned to Holland in mid-March it re-joined 125 Wing at Eindhoven just as it came under command of Group Captain Johnnie Johnson – the leading RAF Ace in Europe.

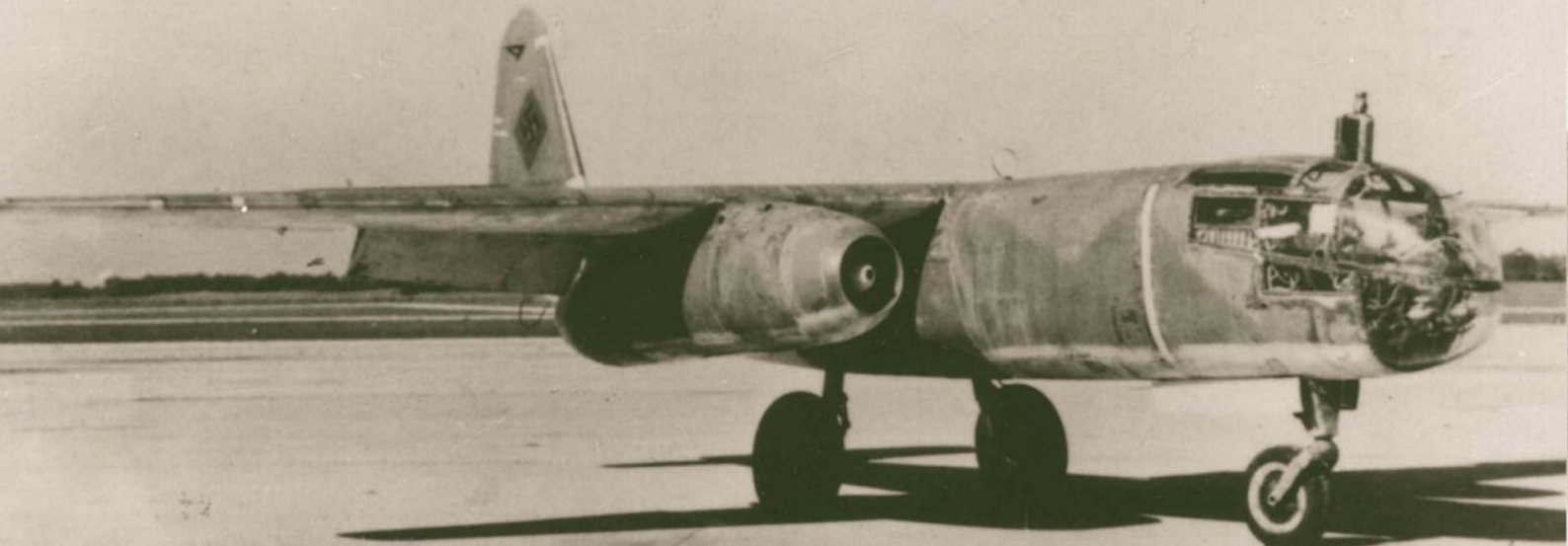
Command of 41 Squadron changed too when Douglas Benham was replaced by the newly-promoted Squadron Leader John Shepherd DFC & Bar, a pilot who already had two personal and three shared victories to his name. Shepherd had arrived from the disbanded 610

Squadron with which he had destroyed seven V1 flying bombs the previous summer; he brought with him Flight Lieutenant Tony Gaze, who became the 'A' Flight commander.

Renewing its offensive, 41

Squadron resumed armed reconnaissance missions, marauding over north-west Germany at low and medium level, a role in which the Griffon-engine Spitfire XIVs were superior to almost anything fielded by the Luftwaffe. By this time, the squadron was flying the Spitfire Mk.XIVE, a variant that was equipped with an improved gyro gunsight that greatly assisted in air-to-air gunnery, though much

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of 41 Squadron's work remained ground attack. Flight Lieutenant Rake recalled some of the problems encountered by the pilots:

"At this stage our armoured columns were breaking out across the North German plain and our brief on almost every sortie was to attack anything that moved ahead of the 'bomb line'. The tanks were going forward so fast that we were often given a revised 'bomb line' by our GCI controller, 'Kenway', after we were airborne. Sometimes the tanks even got ahead of this and we would have to pull out of attacks when we saw the colours of the day displayed on the tops of tanks and other armoured vehicles."

Contact with the enemy jets was never far away. On 8 April 1945, the Wing moved the short distance to Twente. Two days later it was Tony Gaze who had 41's next encounter with a jet when he chased an Arado Ar 234, though the jet outpaced him and he was then forced to break off the chase to avoid some Fw 190s. However, as Rake described to the author,

two days later it was a different story.

"My log book confirms that I shared its destruction with Flt Lt Tony Gaze DFC. We took off from Twente on the Dutch/German border on 12 April 1945, climbing through quite a lot of cloud towards Delmenhorst-Verden. Tony was leading the flight.

"We came out on top at around 20,000 feet and, as we levelled out, I recall seeing what I recognised as an Arado 234 twin jet break cloud to port ahead of us and below. I was in the near perfect position for a quarter attack. My Spit, a XIVE, was fitted with a gyro gunsight with a ranging twist grip on the throttle. As I dived towards the target I was able to position the jet within the diamond markers on the gunsight – thus having the correct range and deflection to open fire.

"My opening burst hit the starboard engine and it was smoking as it rolled over and dived towards the cloud. I got in one or two more bursts as I followed it down. I believe that I claimed the 'kill' but think that Tony must have had a share in finishing it off."

For his part, Gaze, who was flying SM823 EB-E, recalled that "I kept doing little tiny squirts, knocked one engine out, and the other was smoking so I don't think he'd have got very far. He stalled when I was shooting at him. My No.2 followed him down and as the Arado tried to make a crash landing, he blew him up."

It was Gaze's second success against a jet. Two days after this came

ABOVE: Squadron Leader Douglas Benham, 41's Squadron's CO for a time, flew Spitfire XIV NH745/EB-V – one of the first of the variant fitted with a bubble hood – during his final days with the squadron. (D.I. Benham via C.H. Thomas)

BELOW LEFT: It was Flight Lieutenant Peter Cowell who was credited with the destruction of 41's final jet, claiming the second of his four victories. (P. Cowell)

BELOW RIGHT: Pilots from 41 Squadron pictured at Twente in April 1945. Left to right are: Flight Sergeant Smart; Flight Lieutenant Reid; Flying Officer Hegey; Flight Lieutenant Cowell; Flying Officer Gray; unidentified; Flight Lieutenant Rake; Flying Officer Jallands; Flight Lieutenant Stowe; and Flying Officer Healy. Reid, Cowell, Gray and Rake all made claims against jets. (D.S.V. Rake)

a further victory against another advanced German aircraft, but this time in more unusual circumstances.

During 1944 the *Luftwaffe* had formed JG 400 at Brandis near Leipzig under Major Wolfgang Späte to fly the diminutive, but revolutionary, rocket-powered Me 163B *Komet*. By early 1945 its II Gruppe (II/JG 400), under *Hauptmann* Rudi Opitz, was based at Nordholz, a historic airfield near the North Sea coastal town of Cuxhaven. With the airfield being threatened by advancing Allied troops the unit was ordered to evacuate north-east to Husum, a town just south of the Danish border.

To conserve precious fuel many of the *Komet*s were towed there behind Messerschmitt Bf 110G night fighters of 7/NGJ 3, some of which had apparently





ABOVE LEFT: Pilots of 41 Squadron relax in their Mess tent in April 1945. Note the aircraft recognition poster on the wall in the background which appears to show an Messerschmitt Me 262. (D.S.V. Rake)

ABOVE RIGHT: An operational Heinkel He 162 *Volksjäger* with its pilot. When some of 41 Squadron's pilots encountered these single-engine, single-seat fighters for the first time the engine mounted above the fuselage led to an initial identification as a V-1 flying bomb. Designed and built quickly, and made primarily of wood as metals were in very short supply and prioritised for other aircraft, the He 162 was nevertheless the fastest of the first generation of Axis and Allied jets. (ww2images)

BELOW: The primitive conditions endured by the RAF's Second Tactical Air Force units are evident in this view of 41 Squadron's dispersal at Eindhoven in early 1945. (D.S.V. Rake)



been modified and passed onto I/JG 400 for the purpose. On the evening of 14 April 1945, 26-year-old *Oberfeldwebel* Werner Nelte was tasked to pilot a Bf 110 and tow another *Komet* to Husum.

Nelte had earlier served with I/JG 54 flying Bf 109s on the Eastern Front. He had achieved his first victory over a Soviet aircraft on 7 July 1941. By early February 1942 he had claimed six more. He later joined the experimental test unit *Erprobungskommando 16*, making his first operational flight in a Me 163B on 20 May 1944.

A month later, whilst flying Me 163B GH+IQ, Nelte was forced to make an emergency landing whilst being towed-off

when the tug suffered an engine failure. His *Komet* ditched in Lake Zwischenahn and was badly damaged. Having survived, Nelte then joined I/JG 400 at Brandis.

On the evening of 14 April 1945, Squadron Leader Shepherd, in Spitfire XIV SM826 EB-B, took off from Twente at 18.25 hours to lead an armed reconnaissance towards the Bremen area. One of the Spitfires turned back with engine trouble, whilst the other three continued.

Then, just after 19.30 hours, on the second leg of their sweep, the 41 Squadron pilots were approaching Nordholz airfield at 7,000 feet when a pair of enemy aircraft was spotted having just taken off.

The leading aircraft was a Messerschmitt Bf 110G piloted by *Oberfeldwebel* Nelte. It was towing a Me 163 *Komet*, the name of its pilot remains unknown. On sighting them, Shepherd immediately led his section down, as he described afterwards in his combat report:

"On the second leg of sweep, when passing over Nordholz airfield, two aircraft were seen to take off. Diving on them I recognized them as an ME 163 being towed by a ME 110. I was closing very rapidly but managed to get a short burst in on the ME 110, obtaining strikes on port engine and cockpit.

"The 110 went into a left hand diving turn, turning over onto its back, and

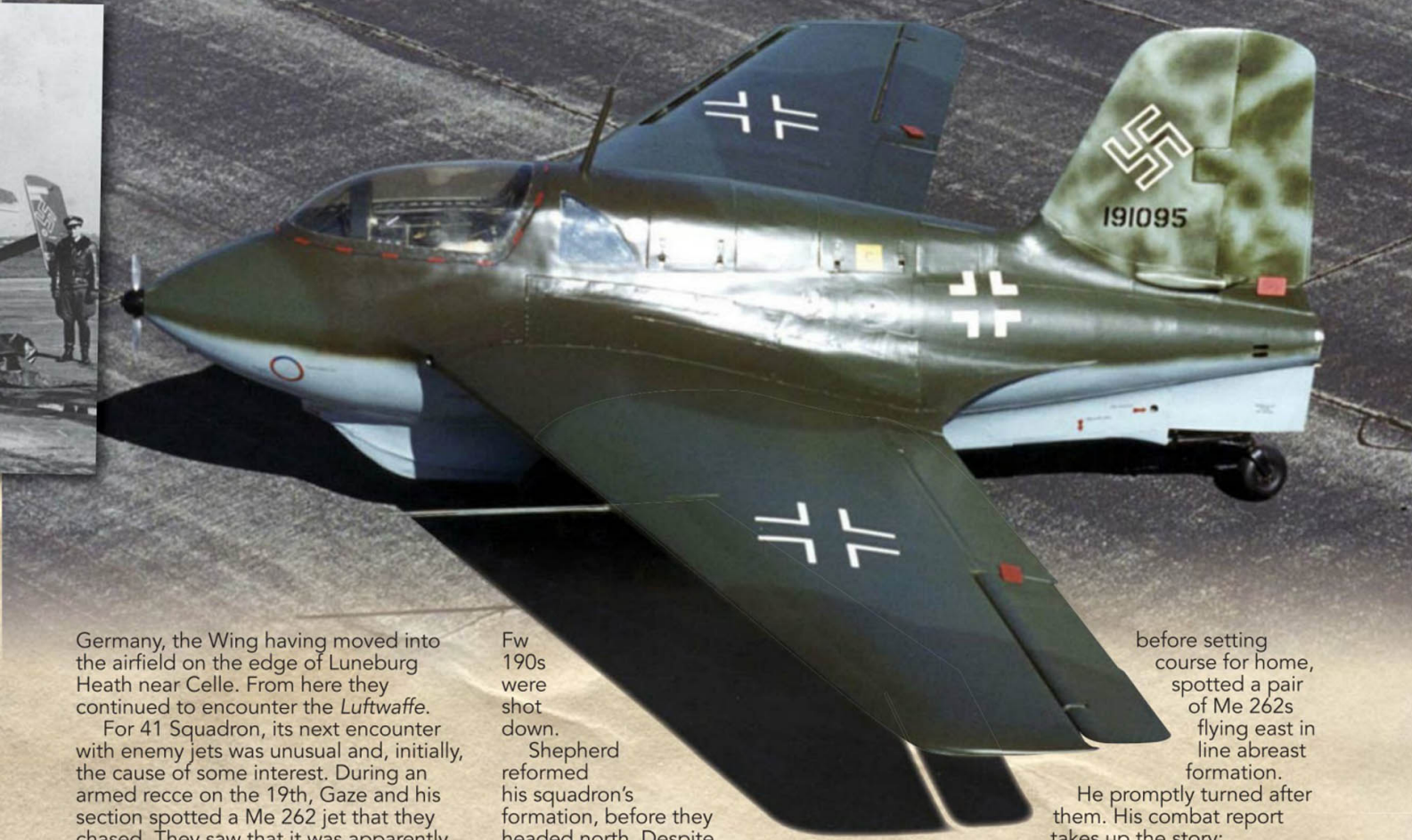
crashed into a field, bursting into flames. The 163 appeared to break away from the 110 and make a wide left hand turn, finally diving straight in about three fields away from the 110."

The Me 163 pilot managed to pull the *Komet* out of its dive at the last moment and crash-landed. Werner Nelte, who was apparently alone in the 110, died. His loss greatly saddened his *Gruppenkommandore*, Rudi Opitz, who wrote in his memoir:

"One event which we regarded as particularly tragic at the time took place on 14 April [1945]. A *Feldwebel*, who had evaded capture when the Allies took the airfield at Rheine, and who had managed to make his way to us at Norholz, was killed soon after taking-off in a Bf 110. He was towing a Me 163 and was shot down by a low-flying British Spitfire, which had managed to approach the airfield unnoticed. The Me 163 made an emergency landing in a clearing in a pine forest."

Two days after this double victory, Shepherd led his squadron into





Germany, the Wing having moved into the airfield on the edge of Luneburg Heath near Celle. From here they continued to encounter the *Luftwaffe*.

For 41 Squadron, its next encounter with enemy jets was unusual and, initially, the cause of some interest. During an armed recce on the 19th, Gaze and his section spotted a Me 262 jet that they chased. They saw that it was apparently leading what they initially identified as a V1 flying bomb in formation, but they were unable to close to engage. Their report caused some puzzlement, until it was realised that the V1 was probably one of the new Heinkel He 162s *Volksjäger* that were based at Leck. With its jet engine mounted on top of the fuselage the confusion is understandable. It was one of the very few encounters that the RAF had with the *Volksjäger*, the only likely success being that of Flight Lieutenant Walkington of 222 Squadron who shot one of them down near Husum the same evening.

The following evening 41 Squadron was out again with Shepherd leading when at about 19.30 hours, over the Kremmen Forest to the north of Orianburg at approximately 7,000 feet, the Spitfire pilots spotted a number of enemy fighters some 300 feet below them. In the successful engagement that followed, five

Fw 190s were shot down.

Shepherd reformed his squadron's formation, before they headed north. Despite the war being almost over, the Spitfire pilots spotted more enemy jets. Some of these were chased and in the resulting engagement Warrant Officer Rossow (this time in NH692) hit a Me 262 that crash landed at high speed on Neuruppen airfield and was apparently wrecked. The other jets escaped in the haze.

Four days later on 24 April 1945, 41 Squadron had an encounter of a different kind. During a patrol towards the Lübeck area they came across some Soviet aircraft which promptly turned and attacked the RAF Spitfires. In the *mêlée*, Tony Gaze was almost forced to fire on a Petlyakov Pe2.

The pilots of 41 Squadron had their final encounter with German jets the next day when 22-year-old Flight Lieutenant Peter Cowell was leading a section. They had just attacked a train near Neumünster and were orbiting at 6,000ft when Cowell,

before setting course for home, spotted a pair of Me 262s flying east in line abreast formation.

He promptly turned after them. His combat report takes up the story:

"They opened up and dived for the deck. I followed them doing 440 mph in the dive and 400 mph on the deck and was closing slowly. I pulled up to 3,000 ft and observed the E/A making for the aerodrome south of Lübeck. The Me 262 on the starboard side did a turn to starboard and put his wheels and flaps down with the intention of doing a right hand circuit. I was therefore able to cut him off and make a short head on attack. No results were observed.

"I then broke sharply to port and was able to make a 60° beam attack as he continued in his circuit. I observed strikes in the cockpit area and between the starboard nacelle and the fuselage, and a large sheet of flame issued from this point. The pilot of the E/A then landed his machine on the grass beside the runway where it slowed round to starboard and volumes of white smoke issued from it." Cowell was credited with his second victory.

Although 41 Squadron continued in action for another two weeks, during which time Derek Rake was to claim its 200th victory of the Second World War, this was the last time that it encountered the German jets. ■

Acknowledgement: The Author is grateful to Group Captain (Retd.) Derek Rake OBE, AFC, and Stephen Ransom for their help in producing this feature.

ABOVE: A Messerschmitt Me 163B Komet (s/n 191095) at the National Museum of the United States Air Force, Dayton, Ohio. The small red rectangles are control locks to prevent wind-damage to the control surfaces while on the ground, and are removed before flight. (USAF)

LEFT: During the final weeks of the war, the pilots of 41 Squadron largely flew the bubble hood Spitfire XIVe – such as MV260 'EB-P' that was flown by many of the squadron's successful pilots. (D.S.V. Rake)

