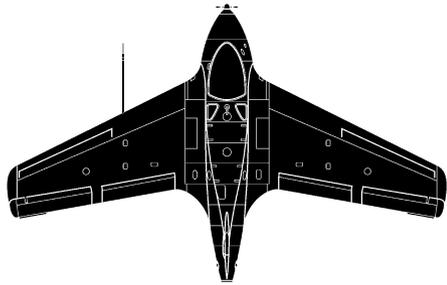


## Me 163 Komet



**This aircraft:** Luftwaffe Me 163B-0 PK+QL—V41—as it looked in May 1944, when assigned to Operational Test Detachment No. 16 and based at Bad Zwischenahn. It is painted in the colors of Manfred von Richthofen—the famed “Red Baron” of World War I.

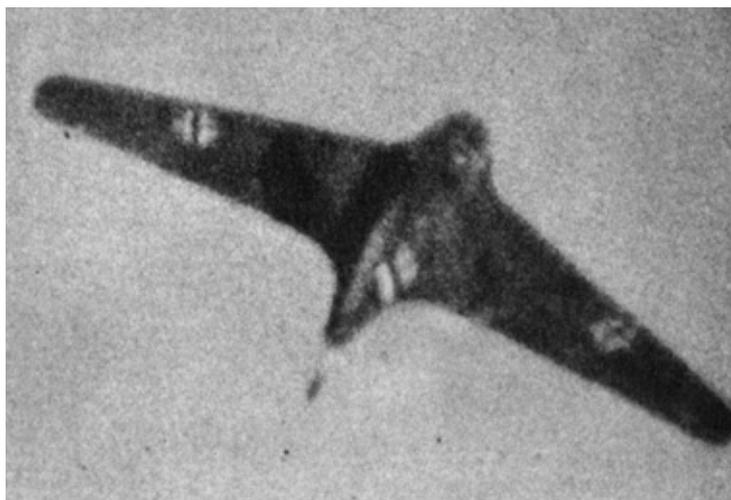
The German Me 163 Komet was the world's first and only operational rocket-powered fighter. The Messerschmitt aircraft was an odd system; it combined a design from the mind of aviation genius Alexander Lippisch with a remarkable liquid-fueled rocket from the vaunted Hellmuth Walter Co. Its great speed could have made it a tremendous bomber interceptor, but its operational value was diminished by extremely short flight durations—less than eight minutes of powered flight.

The Me 163 used swept-back wooden wings, split flaps, a tall vertical stabilizer, and an aluminum alloy fuselage. It had no undercarriage because it took off from a dolly and landed on a metal skid. The Walter engine was inherently dangerous and pilots wore special asbestos flight suits to shield them from the corrosive fuels. Many fliers were killed in accidents. In fact, the aircraft was as dangerous to

German pilots as it was to Allied bomber crews. For all that, the aircraft had excellent flying characteristics. And it was fast. In 1941, it hit 623.85 mph; this speed was unmatched until 1947.

As the Allied bomber offensive grew in scope and impact, the Luftwaffe moved to distribute Komet squadrons all over Germany to guard key targets. Tactics called for reaching high altitude, diving through a bomber formation, soaring upward again, diving again, and returning to base. In practice, shooting accurately from this flight profile was difficult, and the Komet, overall, proved to be operationally ineffective. Allied fighter pilots figured out the Komet's weakness and would simply wait until it ran out of power. Then they would attack.

—Walter J. Boyne



Me 163 being shot down, as seen from a USAAF P-47 gun camera.

### In Brief

Designed by Messerschmitt ★ built by Messerschmitt, Junkers, Klemm ★ first flight Sept. 1, 1941 ★ crew of one ★ number built approx. 370 ★ rocket powered. **Specific to Me 163B:** one Walter HWK 509A-2 rocket engine ★ armament two 20 mm or two 30 mm cannon ★ max speed (operational) 596 mph ★ cruise speed 500 mph ★ max powered operational endurance 7.5 minutes ★ max range ~ 50 mi (with glide) ★ weight (loaded) 9,500 lb ★ span 30 ft 7 in ★ length 19 ft 2 in ★ height 9 ft 1 in.

### Famous Fliers

**Notables:** Rolf Glogner, Fritz Kelb, Johannes Kiel, Herbert Langer, Robert Olejnik, Josef Pohs, Hanna Reitsch, Siegfried Schubert, Wolfgang Spate, Anton Thaler. **Test pilots:** Hans Boye, Heini Dittmar, Bernhard Hohmann, Rudy Opitz. Foreign: Eric Brown (Royal Navy), Gus Lundquist (USAAF).

### Interesting Facts

Flown only by pilots who first made 100 successful flights in gliders ★ climbed at an astounding 16,000 feet per minute (initial rate) ★ lay immobile after landing, picked up with special retrieval trailers ★ used electrical power generated by small wind-driven propeller on nose ★ filled with toxic and highly dangerous fuel ★ carried jettisonable fuel tank ★ had engine that could be shut off to extend flight by gliding ★ enjoyed an actual firing window in combat of only 2.5 seconds ★ scored nine confirmed kills ★ built in Japan by Mitsubishi as the J8M.