



# Sharks of the Air: Willy Messerschmitt and How He Built the World's First Operational Jet Fighter

*James Neal Harvey*

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In July 1944 the Allies were stunned by the appearance of the Messerschmitt Me-262, the world's first operational jet warplane. This new German fighter was more than 100 mph faster than any other aircraft in the skies. Although always greatly outnumbered, the Me-262 gained scores of victories over Allied fighters and bombers, and by the end of the war, many of the Luftwaffe's greatest aces had clamored to be in their cockpits. No wonder military leaders believed that if it had been introduced earlier, this jet could have changed the outcome of the war.

Sharks of the Air tells the story of Willy Messerschmitt's life, and shows how this aeronautical genius built many revolutionary airplanes—not excluding the Luftwaffe's mainstay, the Me-109—and culminating in the Me-262. It describes how his various warplanes fought in Spain, Poland, France, Britain, the U.S.S.R., and over Germany, and it provides thrilling accounts of air battles drawn from combat reports and interviews with veterans.

This book also shows how Messerschmitt—like other geniuses such as Porsche, von Braun, and Speer—was affected by cutthroat Nazi politics, and describes his intense rivalries with other aircraft designers. It reveals aspects of his life never before made public, including his love affair with the beautiful Baroness Lilly Michel-Rolino, a rich aristocrat who left her husband to live with Willy.

And finally it shows how in World War II Messerschmitt believed he was loyally supporting the Fatherland, until he realized too late that Hitler was a madman. Like many of the technical innovations of Nazi Germany in the war, production arrived too late in order to change the final outcome. If Messerschmitt had been given free rein from the start, however, Allied air superiority might never have occurred.

Author James Neal Harvey has been a pilot for more than 40 years and has owned a dozen aircraft (including a De Havilland Tiger Moth built for the RAF, a Stinson V-77 that flew in the Royal Navy, and a Messerschmitt Bf-108 that served in the Luftwaffe). Author of six previous books, his grasp of aerodynamics informs the narrative, as he examines how Messerschmitt might well have changed the course of the Second World War.

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