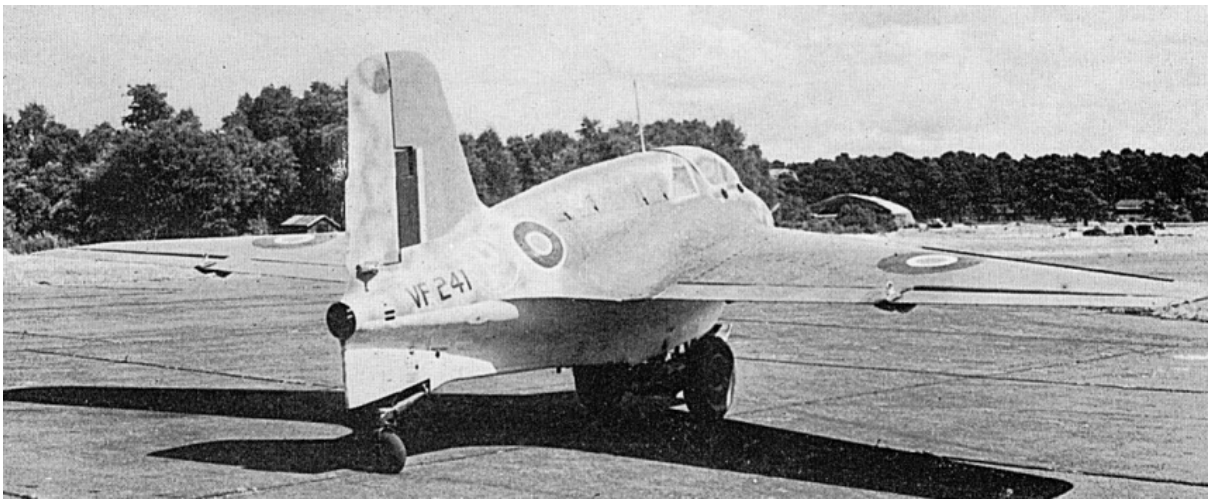
Messerchmitt Me163B

History: After the German authorities had been so impressed by the high speed of the Messerchmitt Me163V-3 in October 1941 they approved its development into an armed interceptor designated the Messerchmitt Me163B named Komet, and ordered 70 of them. Redesign commenced almost immediately and the first prototype flew without an engine on 26 June 1942. However the first Me163 interception sortie did not take place until 13 May 1944.

There were many problems in turning the high speed rocket interceptor from a concept to a reality, many of them related to its power plant. The simple rocket motor of the Me163V had to be replaced with a much more powerful motor (almost double the thrust) which gave the Komet sufficient flight duration to climb to the altitude of intruders and then engage them. Developing the engine was slow and difficult, the first Me163B powered flight occurred in February 1943 with an interim motor and the first flight with a HWK 109-509 motor did not occur until August 1943. Even when it entered service the motor was far from safe and it was made even more dangerous by the rocket fuels which reacted extremely violently when they came into contact with each other. As a result the Komet was probably more dangerous to take off or land than it was to fly in combat. There were other causes of delay; *Erprobungskommando 16* (Test Detachment 16), which had been set up to bring the Me163 into operation, was later given the task of testing all rocket and jet powered fighters so its overstretched staff could not concentrate their attentions on the Me163. Allied air raids disrupted design and construction, training and operation methods had to be developed while special facilities had to be constructed to handle the fighter.



One of the Me163Bs captured at the end of the war and tested by the RAF

The Luftwaffe began moves to set up the first Me163 operational units in January 1944 with creation of what became 1/JG400. The squadron began to form in February 1944 and by 1 March it had 12 pilots and five aeroplanes. By May 1944, however, EK.16 was still the only unit with a fully operational Me163 and trained pilots so Wolfgang Spate, the unit commander, undertook the first interception in an all-red aeroplane that had been painted specially for the event by his ground crew. During the flight he attempted to intercept two P-47 but experienced a flame-out and compression problems as he approached the sound barrier, so he returned to base without success.

The rest of the Komet's history was just as unfortunate. Around 400 were ordered and perhaps 300 produced, plans for their use were drawn up and more units established but a chronic

fuel shortage kept most of them on the ground while their high speed made it almost impossible for them to do any damage when they did intercept something (their closing speed gave the pilot about a second and a half in which to achieve a hit with the slow firing cannons). In all it is unlikely that Komets shot down more than a dozen allied aeroplanes. Even so their speed, their appearance and German propaganda gave them a reputation far above anything they achieved. After the war the allies took many as trophies and test aeroplanes so there are still ten or so in existence, one in the possession of the Australian War Memorial.

Data: *Engine* one Walter HWK 109-509A-2 rocket motor of 1700kg (3 750lb) thrust. *Wing span* 9.32m (30ft 7 in). *Length* 5.84m (19ft 2 in). *Maximum speed* 690km/h (596mph). *Crew* one. Armament two 30mm MK 108 cannon

The kit: ACADEMY 1/72

There have been several kits of the Me163B offered before this from Heller, Airfix and Lindberg (the ones that come to mind instantly) but none of them comes anywhere near this kit in terms of quality and accuracy. To put it simply, this is a delightful kit to make with almost nothing to criticise and many positive points.

Being critical doesn't take long. For some strange reason there is an extension of the wing leading edge for the pitot tube that doesn't appear on any of the plans or photographs that I could find, but it takes about half a minute to get rid of it. The space behind the cockpit is vacant but photos and cutaway drawings suggest that it should be filled with a fuel tank. Perfectionists would do something about it but I didn't. Thirdly, the wings come with separate slats that didn't work very well for me. Fourth and finally, because this is such a tiny model *Academy* have offered an additional sprue with parts for the special tractor designed to carry the Komet about after it had landed and there are parts that give you the option of making the two-seater training version. The kit therefore comes with 57 parts but you only need about 25 of them to make the complete aeroplane. Some might say this is hardly something to criticise, but I told you it was hard to find things to complain about.

On the positive side, the detailing is exquisite (particularly in the cockpit), the fit of parts precise, the kit design is excellent so the completed model is a good replica of the original complex shape of the Komet and the instruction sheet is generally good. I had no trouble in putting this kit together and very little trouble in painting it. I replaced the plastic pitot tube with a pin cut to the correct length, improved the antenna with a slight length of thin stretched sprue and that was all it needed. The decal sheet is excellent (apart from the lack of swastikas) although I had some trouble in getting all the tiny stencilling in the right place. What more can I say. The end result if a delightful little model.