HEINKEL'S LAST FIGHTER

A HOMEGROWN COLD WAR INTERCEPTOR FOR WEST GERMANY: THE HE 31

West Germany's acquisition of the Lockheed F-104G Starfighter as part of the "Deal of the Century" in the late 1950s is well known; what is not is the newly forged Federal Republic's attempts to kickstart an indigenous military aerospace industry with the development of a supersonic high-altitude interceptor of its own — as TONY BUTTLER AMRAeS relates

MUCH HAS BEEN written about the German aircraft industry's remarkable achievements before and during the Second World War, but it often gets forgotten that the nation's aircraft designers have continued to create new and advanced designs ever since.

During the 1950s and 1960s considerable effort went into German VTOL (vertical take-off and landing) fighter studies, eventually culminating in the flight-testing of two types of prototype — the EWR VJ101 in the 1960s *[See Andreas Zeitler's* We Wanted To Do Something Different . . . *in* TAH9 *— Ed.]* and the VFW VAK 191B in the 1970s. However, there were also efforts to create a conventional supersonic interceptor. One such example was the Heinkel He 31 *Florett* (Foil — as in the sword used in fencing). It is not well known overseas that this project was a serious attempt by West Germany to develop a new fighter/interceptor of its own rather than having to buy from a foreign country. The effort ultimately failed, however, and the nation finally settled on the USA's Lockheed F-104 Starfighter.

Designed during 1956–57 as a bespoke weapons system for the air defence of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), the He 31 would ultimately progress only as far as the planning stage. Instead, the *Bundeswehr* (West German Armed Forces) would buy the F-104G, in part because West Germany was still restricted in terms of what defence equipment it could procure, and also because its domestic aviation industry was still far from being adequately equipped to undertake the development and construction of a new cutting-edge combat aircraft. Nevertheless, the concepts of the He 31 and its competitor, the Messerschmitt P.1211, present powerful evidence of the creativity then still extant within the German aircraft industry.

This article was originally written by German aviation historian Wolfgang Mühlbauer and, as *Heinkel's letzter Jäger*, was published in German-language historical magazine *Flugzeug Classic* in its December 2007 issue. Wolfgang has kindly given permission to have his work translated and adapted for *TAH*.

ABOVE ***What might have been? This specially commissioned artwork by MARK HARRIS shows a pair of He 31 Floretts climbing to intercept high-flying enemy aircraft after its prospective entry into Luftwaffe service in 1962–63. For more information on the illustration work of Mark Harris, visit www.markharris.ca. © MARK HARRIS 2020***

A HOMEGROWN FIGHTER

Two related conferences held in London and Paris in September and October 1954 formally established the future status of West Germany. These conferences were organised after the Soviet Union had taken steps to give the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) a degree of legitimacy as a separate state. The outcome of the two conferences was the ratification of the Paris Agreements (aka Paris Accords) on May 5, 1955, which brought to an end to the military occupation of West Germany. The country was granted full sovereignty and permitted to join Nato, which allowed the nation to return to the design and development of military aircraft. This was important because according to many experts, industrialists and politicians, the establishment of a new technologically advanced industry could be achieved only by building military types; the civilian market alone offered little prospect of furnishing a profitable aircraft development and production capability for the future.

At this point contemporary Luftwaffe equipment — consisting mostly of a mix of obsolete and often donated aircraft, plus the licensed manufacture of more modern types — was at best suitable only for training. None of the aircraft on strength were suited to meet the nation's true defence needs, so their replacement by modern equipment required attention as a matter of urgency. The Luftwaffe and West Germany's aircraft industry had started to co-operate with other countries, as this provided basic technological know-how and experience in producing modern military aircraft and, above all, work for German companies. The desired breakthrough towards economic and technical

ABOVE ***At the end of the Second World War Josef Kammhuber, who had masterminded the Luftwaffe's wartime nightfighter defence system, was taken into custody by the USA, but was released without any charges in April 1948. After a spell in Argentina establishing a training programme for the nation's air force, he returned to Germany to join the Luftwaffe.***

independence, however, could only be achieved with the deployment of new prototypes of state-of-the-art designs.

This was not the only reason why the realisation of an independently developed high-performance combat aircraft seemed attractive. The particular geographical location of the Federal Republic required extremely short reaction times for air defence, and thus specialised weapons systems, which at the time did not exist. Accordingly, representatives of the *Bundesministerium der Verteidigung* (BMVg — Federal Ministry of Defence), including *Generals* A.D. Vorwald and Josef Kammhuber, explored the possibilities for their own industry in the so-called Koberner aviation talks held in 1956. Both had previously reached high office in Germany's wartime Luftwaffe, and in June 1957 Kammhuber became the new air arm's first *Inspekteur der Luftwaffe* (Commander of the Air Force), having organised Germany's wartime nightfighting units.

First priority at the talks were the problems of the nation's air defences, followed by equipment and development issues. A lightweight high-performance interceptor quickly became a central