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THE LAST-MINUTE ESCAPE FROM A BURNING ENGLISH ELECTRIC LIGHTNING INTERCEPTOR RESULTED IN ONE OF AVIATION'S MOST DRAMATIC PHOTOS

BY MARSHALL WAINWRIGHT



Jim Meads' famous photo of Lightning F.1 XG332 a moment from destruction. Farmer Mick Sutterby, hearing the sound of the ejection seat, has spun around to see the fighter's final moment. He had arrived on his tractor in an attempt to chase the photographer away. Fortunately, that did not happen.

The P.1 prototype differed greatly from the production aircraft.



It was one of those perfect early fall days in Britain. The sky was cerulean blue with some swirls of white cloud while the temperature was in the low 60s. The date was 13 September 1962 and Jim Meads and his family lived in Hatfield, which is where de Havilland had their famous aircraft factory. Jim was not an aviation enthusiast but his neighbor was Bob Sowray who was employed as a test pilot for de Havilland. Talking over the fence, Bob said he had a flight scheduled in the new Lightning, a fire-breathing monster that climbed like the proverbial skyrocket.

Jim's children perked up when they heard the mention of the Lightning. They certainly knew what it was and thrilled to the fighter's takeoff with both afterburners blazing. Bob said the kids could come and watch the test flight and the boys were wild with excitement. They would be able to tell the other kids at school on Monday that they were invited to see a flight performed by Britain's newest fighter.

So, it was all put together — Bob would head to the airfield, Jim and the boys would go to a farm field that offered an excellent view of the Lightnings coming and going, while the two wives headed to town for shopping.

Pre-production English Electric Lightning F Mk I XG332 had been pulled out of the large hangar and was readied for the test flight. This aircraft had made its first flight on 25 May 1959 from the English Electric facility at Samlesbury and J.W.C. Squier was the first pilot to take the plane into the air. As a point of interest, XG332 did not go directly into the Royal Air Force but, rather, it was retained by English Electric, British Aircraft Corporation, and de Havilland for test work with the new Firestreak and



Lightnings in the very colorful markings of No. 56 Squadron.

Red Top air-to-air missiles.

Jim Meads was a professional photographer who made his living taking shots for the many newspapers and magazines of the time period. He loved nature photography and would spend hours taking photos of birds and different animals in the English countryside. As he and the kids departed the house, Jim saw one of his cameras sitting atop a sideboard. Somewhat like the bus driver going on a driving vacation, Jim's first inclination was to leave the camera. However, something in his mind tugged at him and he picked it up and noted that the roll of film it contained had only two remaining shots but perhaps he could get a photo of his neighbor flying the Lightning and make some prints for the kids.

Development of the Lightning began during the closing stages of the Second World War to fulfil a proposed need for a supersonic interceptor. Designer Teddy Petter at English Electric took a proposal to Britain's Ministry of Supply to create such an aircraft and during 1947, Specification ER.103 was issued for a single research aircraft capable of Mach 1.5 at 50,000 feet.

Development moved ahead and it

was obvious that the new design would be radical. By 1948, the proposal called for the twin jet engines to be stacked one atop the other while the wing had a drastic 40-degree sweep back. However, supersonic aeronautics were rapidly advancing during this time period and by the following year the sweep of the wing had been increased to 60 degrees with a high-mounted horizontal tail (that would change). To speed development, Short Brothers was issued with a contract to build the Short SB.5 during mid-1950. This was a low-speed research aircraft that could test sweep angles from 50 to 69 degrees along with high and low tail positions.

The new interceptor was given the designation of P.1 and testing of the SB.5 with a P.1 configuration began in January 1954. It soon became evident that the maximum sweep would work and that was exactly what was needed for the new aircraft. While work on the P.1 moved ahead, the mission for the aircraft clarified a bit. Capable of stunningly high speeds with an amazing climb rate, the interceptor would be utilized to defend the bases housing Britain's new generation of nuclear bombers — the V-force, comprising Valiant, Victor,