A77 – Gloster Meteor

Three Gloster Meteor F.8s (A77-882, A77-875 and A77-870) of the Meteorites aerobatic team from No 78 Fighter Wing, RAAF Williamtown, New South Wales, circa 1957. Source: Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria

Gloster Meteor F.8 A77-881 was flown by the Commanding Officer of No 77 Squadron, circa 1955. This aircraft carried the distinctive green and aluminium checker band around the rear fuselage. Source: RAAF

On 15 May 1941, the experimental Gloster E.28/39 made the first flight by a British jet-propelled aircraft, starting the process of taking the United Kingdom (UK) into the jet era. The Gloster Meteor fighter became the Royal Air Force's (RAF) first operational jet aircraft with the delivery of the first aircraft to No 616 Squadron RAF on 12 July 1944. The Meteor's first operational sorties were flown from RAF Manston in Kent on 27 July 1944, chasing the V-1 flying bombs which were aimed at London. Gloster Meteor F.I and F.III aircraft were the only Allied jets to see action in World War II.

With its much more powerful Rolls-Royce Derwent 5 turbojet, the Meteor F.4 (first flown in May 1945), showed the real potential of the Meteor with a top speed of 940km/h or Mach 0.77 at sea level, and Mach 0.8 at altitude. Until the Hawker Hunter began to enter widespread service in the mid-1950s, the Meteor F.4 and further improved F.8 were the RAF's main day interceptors. Other versions included the two-seat operational trainer T.7, tactical fighter-reconnaissance FR.9, photo-reconnaissance PR.10 and Armstrong Whitworth-built NF.11, NF.12, NF.13 and NF.14 two-seat night fighters. Total Meteor production was 3886, the last (an NF.14) delivered in May 1955.

In May 1946 ex-RAF Meteor F.3 EE427 arrived at RAAF Laverton from the UK. It was assembled and flown as A77-1, the first jet fighter officially brought on charge by the RAAF in June 1946. While the UK hoped that the RAAF would order the Meteor, the

de Havilland Vampire (see entry A78 in the second series) became the first jet to enter RAAF squadron service in 1949. In the meantime, A77-1 carried out trials at RAAF Laverton and RAAF Darwin, and captured Australian newspaper headlines when it flew over Melbourne at 788km/h (490mph).

War broke out in Korea in June 1950, just as No 77 Squadron was due to return to Australia from its Occupation duties in Japan. The squadron stayed to serve in the Korean War and although its North American/CAC Mustangs proved useful for ground support, they were outclassed by the Chinese MiG-15 jet fighters which entered the war later in 1950. The RAAF needed a jet fighter, and despite interest in the F-86 Sabre and Hawker Hunter, the Meteor was the only one available at the time.

The first seventeen Meteors for the RAAF—fifteen F.8 fighters and two T.7 two-seat trainers—arrived in Japan by ship as deck cargo. Following deliveries were made by air, and the Meteor F.8 became the first RAAF jet to go to war.

Ninety-three Meteor F.8s and four T.7s were delivered to the RAAF for service in Korea with scattered serial numbers ranging between A77-2 (T.7) and A77-982 (F.8). On 29 July 1951, No 77 Squadron made history by being the first RAAF squadron to take jet aircraft into combat, fielding two flights of eight Meteor aircraft on patrols near the Yalu River. The jets were initially used in air-to-air combat, with No 77 Squadron credited with three MiG-15s shot down.

However, the MiG-15 was a more capable adversary and from early 1952 the squadron transferred to ground attack operations. The RAF had not cleared the Meteor to carry unguided rockets but the RAAF undertook the necessary modifications and testing and used the weapons successfully, fitting the aircraft with eight 27kg (60lb) rockets under the wings. Despite considerable success in the ground attack role the cost of RAAF Meteor operations in Korea was high: between July 1951 and July 1953, No 77 Squadron lost thirty-two pilots and no fewer than fifty-three Meteors (fifty-two F.8s and one T.7) to enemy action and operational accidents.

A further two Meteor T.7s were delivered direct to Australia while the surviving forty-one F.8s and three T.7s from Korea returned to Australia aboard HMS *Vengeance.* A further three T.7s were delivered to Australia in 1955. One Meteor NF.11 had been delivered by sea from the UK in August 1953. As A77-3 it was used by the Weapons Research Establishment (WRE) for missile trials and other tests.

Gloster Meteor F.8 A77-851, named *Halestorm* and flown by Sergeant George Hale, served with No 77 Squadron in Korea, and is seen here at Kimpo airfield armed with rockets for a ground attack mission, circa 1953. Source: Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria

A line up No 77 Squadron Gloster Meteor F.8s, with the Commanding Officer of the squadron, Wing Commander Royston in the foreground, circa 1955. Source: Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria

Two Gloster Meteor F.8s (A77-867 and A77-397) of No 77 Squadron getting airborne at RAAF Laverton, circa 1955. Source: Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria

When No 77 Squadron finally returned to Australia in December 1954 after nearly twelve years' continuous overseas service, its Meteors were distributed between Nos 75 and 77 Squadrons until withdrawn by late 1956 and replaced by the CAC Sabre (see entry A94 in the second series). During the period 1955-56, No 75 Squadron established the Meteorites, the RAAF's first aerobatic team which performed for a few months. Meteors were also allotted to Nos 22 and 23 Citizen Air Force squadrons which used them for general training flying until the units were relegated to non-flying roles in June 1960. A handful of Meteors stayed on the strength of No 38 Squadron for a short while longer.

From the mid-1950s to the early 1970s almost one hundred Meteors of various marks were operated and maintained by the RAAF with RAAF and RAF serials on behalf of British Ministry of Supply trials at Edinburgh and Woomera. Most of these were converted to Meteor U.15, 16, 21 and 21A target drones from both Australian and British aircraft with the conversions performed in both countries.

PUNCHING OUT

On 29 August 1951, 77 Squadron Meteor pilot Warrant Officer Ron Guthrie damaged a MiG-15 in air combat near Chongju. The MiG plummeted earthwards but Guthrie did not see it crash as he was subsequently forced to eject at high altitude after his aircraft (A77-721) was extensively damaged by another MiG–flown by a Russian–and became uncontrollable. His ejection was the first by a Martin Baker ejection seat in combat, and only the fifth in any Martin Baker seat.

At the time, it was the highest ejection at 11 600m (38 000 feet) and also performed at the very high speed of Mach 0.84. Guthrie's descent by parachute into captivity by the Chinese took almost half an hour. During his initial interrogation by the Russians, Guthrie was told that the MiG he engaged had *'fallen to your guns'* and had indeed crashed.

Two No 77 Squadron Gloster Meteor F.8s (A77-982 & A77-368) flying in formation with a two-seater Meteor T.7 (A77-702) over Japan, circa 1951–52. Source: Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria

TECHNICAL DATA: Gloster Meteor F.8

DESCRIPTION:

Single-seat interceptor and ground-attack fighter of all-metal, stressed-skin construction.

POWER PLANTS:

Two 16.0kN (3600lb) thrust Rolls-Royce Derwent 8 turbojets.

DIMENSIONS:

Span 11.33m (37ft 2in); length 13.59m (44ft 7in); height 3.96m (13ft 0in).

WEIGHTS:

Empty 4853kg (10 700lb); normal loaded 7121kg (15,700lb); max loaded 8663kg (19 100lb).

ARMAMENT:

Four 20mm cannon in nose; eight 27kg (60lb) rockets or two 454kg (1000lb) bombs under wings.

PERFORMANCE:

Max speed 941km/h 585mph at sea level, 869km/h 540mph at 9144m (30 000ft); cruising speed 666km/h (414mph); initial climb 2134m/min (7000ft/min); service ceiling 13 106m (43 000ft); range with ventral tank 1234km 767 miles.