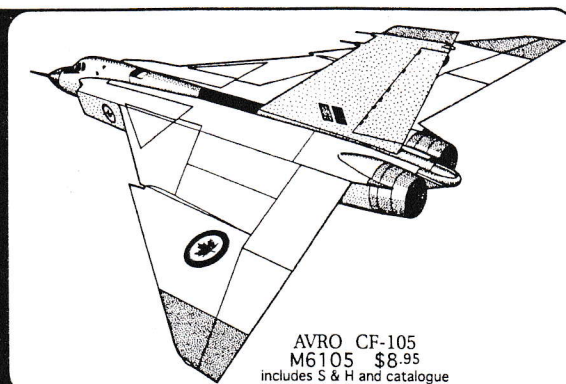


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enemy airfields or engage enemy fighters about 10 minutes ahead of the Ilyushin Il-2 or Petlyakov Pe-2 ground attack planes. By mid-1944, *Luftwaffe* units were receiving directives to "avoid combat below 5,000 meters with Yakovlev fighters lacking an oil cooler under the nose." The French volunteers of the Normandie-Niemen Regiment, when offered their choice of the latest fighters, unanimously requested Yak-3s, which started to reach them in mid-July 1944. The regiment's four *escadrilles* claimed 119 victories out of their wartime total of 273 in Yak-3s.

The Yakovlev team unveiled an all-metal version of their lightweight wonder, the Yak-3U (*Usilenny*, or "strengthened"), early in 1944. Its 1,650-hp M-107A engine gave the Yak-3U a speed of 447 mph at 18,045 feet and the ability to climb to 16,405 feet in 3.9 minutes, the highest performance of any piston-engine Yak. The Yak-3U was armed with two fuselage-mounted 20mm B-20 cannons. Nicknamed "Ubiytca" ("killer") by its pilots, the Yak-3U was rushed into production in the autumn of 1944, but it did not reach operational units before Germany surrendered.

Experimental derivatives of the Yak-3 included the Yak-3TK, a high-altitude version using an exhaust-driven turbosupercharger; the Yak-3R, with a liquid-fuel rocket in the tail; and the Yak-3UTI two-seat trainer, which entered production in 1946 as the Yak-11. By the time the Yak-11 was phased out of production in early 1946, a total of 4,848 Yak-3s of all models had been built.

The lightweight fighters of WWII were disappointments with the exception of the Yak-3, which was really a conventional fighter reduced in size and stripped to bare essentials. The elusive goal of creating a competitive inexpensive fighter, or a lightweight point-defense interceptor, did not die in 1945, however. The jet age was dawning, bringing with it a new generation of unusual and sometimes bizarre little aircraft. □

For additional reading, Jon Guttman recommends: Fighters of World War II, by William Green; U.S. Fighters of World War Two, by Robert F. Dorr; and Bloody Shambles, by Christopher Shores and Brian Cull, with Yasuho Izawa.

TH To read about how the Cold War accelerated jet aircraft development in the 1940s—including a jet-powered development of the Yak-3U and two bizarre jet-powered variations on the lightweight fighter concept, the Northrop XP-79 and McDonnell XP-85—go to www.thehistorynet.com on the World Wide Web and read "Defining the Jet," by Jon Guttman, which will be published on TheHistoryNet starting the week of December 8, 1997.