



Marcel Dassault

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1892–1986

By Thomas v. Jones

Marcel Dassault died on April 18, 1986, in Paris at the age of ninety-four. The father of French aviation and a graduate of that nation's first aeronautical engineering school, Dassault was the longtime director of Avions Marcel Dassault-Breguet Aviation, one of Europe's largest aviation companies. In that capacity, he created and produced such high-performance combat aircraft as the Mystère and delta-winged Mirage, a family of planes that today is among the most respected and widely operated fighter-bombers in the world. Dassault also made important contributions to commercial aviation with his Falcon family of executive transport jets.

From 1951 until his death, Marcel Dassault served as a member of the French Parliament. He held France's highest military award, the Grand Cross of the French Legion of Honor. He was elected a foreign associate of the National Academy of Engineering in 1976 for his "remarkable achievements in the design and development of new aircraft for military and commercial use."

Marcel Dassault's vision and extraordinary engineering talents helped to shape the first century of aviation history. He was a true pioneer whose imagination, persistence, and management of advanced aerospace technology are indelibly blended into the tricolor banner of the French nation. Despite

the formidable obstacles and great personal dangers encountered in his ninety-four years, Marcel Dassault remained a man of uncommon strength and unwavering principle with a deep faith in the idea that technology and commitment can overcome almost any challenge.

Born in Paris on January 22, 1892, Dassault developed an early interest in design and scientific inquiry. At the age of nineteen, he received a degree in electrical engineering and then began to specialize in the new, little-known field of aeronautics.

In the years just prior to World War I, Dassault put his technical skills and aviation ideas to work in the service of the French Corps of Engineers. He was selected to improve the design studies of the Caudron G-3 biplane and, later, to manage its manufacture. He also developed new designs for more efficient propellers. By 1916 he was producing them, first for the Caudron G-3 and then for the Hélice Eclair, the Spad credited with giving French fliers a distinct flying advantage during World War I.

After World War I, Dassault set out to fulfill a dream that had begun in the courtyard of his primary school with his first glimpse of an airplane circling the Eiffel Tower. French aviation was about to begin in earnest, and Dassault gathered a small team of design engineers and housed them in an old furniture factory. Soon he had built up a highly successful aviation company, Avions Marcel Dassault-Breguet Aviation, to the point at which the French government nationalized his operations in 1936. In 1940 he produced the Languedoc 61, a four-engine civil transport plane. A somber shadow was cast on its maiden voyage, however: The Germans marched into Paris, and the occupation of France began.

Authorities in Nazi Germany's aviation industry quickly offered Dassault a position to design and build a fleet of aircraft in exchange for his personal freedom and protection. He defied the German high command, however, and refused their offer, spending the war years first in Vichy prisons and then at the Buchenwald concentration camp. At Buchenwald,

he contracted diphtheria, and post-diphtheria paralysis plagued him throughout the remainder of his life. When the death camp was liberated on April 19, 1945, Dassault was frail and weak, but his dream was as strong as ever.

With great courage and a fierce determination, Dassault began again, his first project the design and production of the Ouragan, Europe's first jet. Later he introduced the first European plane to break the sound barrier, the Mystère IV, which was followed by the Mirage III, the plane that opened the era of Mach 2 aircraft. The Dassault Mirage, with its pure aerodynamic shape, high performance, and uncompromising attention to detail, became the standard for modern French combat aircraft.

The rest is legend. With the introduction of the Mirage III in 1956, France began to meet its military aircraft requirements solely through domestic production. Today, it remains the only European nation with an air force equipped entirely with domestically built aircraft. In addition, Dassault's Mirage family of combat fighters remains one of France's best export successes. By 1986 Avions Marcel Dassault-Breguet Aviation had built six thousand aircraft for sixty-one countries.

Dassault's contributions extend far beyond military aviation. His commercial business jets are noted for both performance and reliability, and his leadership and industrial management skills enabled Avions Marcel Dassault-Breguet Aviation to bring France to the forefront of the European manned spaceplane program. Always active in French politics, Dassault served his country for thirty years, as a Gaullist deputy and as a senator for the Union des Démocrates pour la République.

In 1967 Marcel Dassault was honored with the Grand Cross of the French Legion of Honor, the nation's highest military award. He was also presented with the *croix de guerre* 1939–1945 for extraordinary wartime service.

In paying tribute to Marcel Dassault, we also pay tribute to that small band of original aviation explorers whose ingenuity

and perseverance enabled the discovery of practical, enduring solutions to previously intractable aviation engineering difficulties. Dassault was an industrial giant, an engineer of exceptional capability, and an aviation genius. Yet most important, he was an inspiration, a resilient man whose courage and insight, genius and spirit served the engineering profession, his country, and his fellow man with extraordinary distinction.

