



Harold Watson's "Whizzers" went hunting for German jets—and came back with several jewels.

# Operation Lusty

**T**HE Me-262 fighter's Mk 108 cannon roared, and a single 30 mm "Mine-Shell" high-explosive round struck the waist of a B-24 bomber. The thin-walled projectile detonated on impact, spraying stainless steel shards in a circular pattern through the Liberator's fuselage. This single deadly hit nearly sliced off the bomber's tail and effectively destroyed the aircraft.

The B-24 did not die under the guns of an Me-262 in the skies over Europe, however. It happened at the weapons test range at Wright Field, Ohio, thanks to the efforts of "Watson's Whizzers," an Army Air Forces intelligence team that went to Europe to seize enemy systems and technology.

The Messerschmitt fighter was in the United States because scientific and technical intelligence personnel put their lives on the line to obtain it and others in the field, make it flyable, and bring it home for testing.

Led by AAF Col. Harold E. Watson, the Air Technical Intelligence (ATI) group brought the dreaded Me-262 jet fighter with its swept wings, axial-flow compressor turbojet engines, and 30 mm cannons—along with other technological secrets—to the United States when World War II ended in the European theater.

With the jet age in its infancy and the Germans enjoying a head start in fielding the technology, obtaining working Me-262s was a coup.

## Black Lists

After the D-Day invasion of June 1944, ATI teams scoured the European countryside, searching for en-

By Robert L. Young



*This 1946 photo shows one of the Me-262 jet fighters, brought back by Watson's Whizzers, in a low pass over Freeman Field, Ind.*



emy aircraft and related equipment. They worked from master intelligence manifests known as “Black Lists.”

When the fighting in Europe stopped in May 1945, the ATI effort intensified. The Americans were only too aware that advanced German technology, including documentation, had to be obtained quickly, before it was destroyed or seized by other countries—especially the Soviet Union.

The project went by the code name Lusty (for Luftwaffe secret technology). The effort required small teams of highly skilled maintenance troops and pilots. It was up to them to find

and acquire the revolutionary German aircraft, make them flyable, and deliver them to seaports for the trip to the United States. One of Watson’s teams went after propeller-driven aircraft. The Whizzers went after jets.

The job of commanding teams headed across Europe spread him thin, so Watson relied heavily on 1st Lt. Robert C. Strobell to carry out the acquisition of the Me-262 fighter.

Watson worked closely with Strobell, who was based at 1st Tactical Air Force (Provisional) headquarters at Vital, France. A P-47 pilot with the 353rd Fighter Group, Strobell was an experienced airman with

79 missions and a Bf-109 kill to his credit.

The Me-262 acquisition started simply enough. Watson walked into Strobell’s office, gave him a small amount of technical data, and ordered him to proceed to Lechfeld, Germany, to obtain as many Me-262s as possible.

Of course, Strobell would also have to train US pilots and maintenance troops to handle the jet, but the good news was there were some German pilots and technicians left at the field to help him out (the Messerschmitt factory was nearby). Given the fact that the war in Europe had just ended, the thought of working with Ger-

mans was hardly comforting. The American troops called upon to trust them with their lives still thought of Germans as the enemy.

Watson selected a team of volunteer US P-47 fighter pilots to learn how to fly the Me-262. None of the pilots had any jet time whatsoever. Most had never even seen a jet.

Pilots selected to fly the Me-262s were Capt. Kenneth E. Dahlstrom, Capt. Fred L. Hillis, 1st Lt. Robert J. Anspach, 1st Lt. William V. Haynes, 1st Lt. Roy W. Brown Jr., 1st Lt. James K. Holt, and Strobell.

Meanwhile, TSgts. Noel D. Moon and Ernest C. Parker and SSGts. John G. Gilson, Donald J. Wilcoxon, Archie E. Bloomer, Everet T. Box, Charles L. Taylor, Robert H. Moore, and Charles A. Barr made the project possible. The crew chiefs made the enemy aircraft flyable despite having to work on a foreign field with no technical information. It had been destroyed by German forces.

The 54th Air Disarmament Squadron was the first to arrive at Lechfeld, home of the Me-262s. Squadron members had their work cut out for them. Normally responsible for getting rid of German weaponry, they were put in charge of collecting and resurrecting some of the very items they were charged with eliminating. Unit personnel were billeted in Augsburg at the Messerschmitt Aircraft Co. From there, they would travel to Lechfeld each day to sift

## Watson's Free Reign

Col. Harold E. Watson was the classic pilot-leader who wholeheartedly took on the challenge of bringing Nazi Germany's finest aircraft home for study.

After serving as a test pilot and earning a master's degree in aeronautical engineering from the University of Michigan, he was then assigned to US Strategic Air Forces in Europe as 1st Tactical Air Force director of maintenance. He received a Bronze Star there after increasing the number of operational aircraft by 18 percent in three months.

He was needed elsewhere. Because of his technical education, flight test experience, and sheer guts, Watson was sent to Wright Field, Ohio, to work for Air Technical Intelligence near the end of the war.

He was given free reign to ensure that Operation Lusty, the search for advanced German aviation technology, was successful. Watson carried a card issued by the Supreme Allied Commander, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. It stated, "The bearer of this card will not be interfered with in the performance of his duty by the military police or any other military organization."

That was all Watson could have hoped for. His teams took advantage of this leverage and trolled the European countryside for intelligence treasures.

Watson took on the dangerous job of flight-testing unfamiliar and sometimes poorly built and maintained aircraft, and by the end of the war, he was constantly flying potentially deadly aircraft.

His flight records included time in the Bf-109, FW-190, He-177, Ju-388, and Ju-290 and jets such as the Me-262 and Ar-234.

through wrecked and damaged aircraft.

### Booby Traps

There were 15 Me-262s, more or less, to turn over to Watson's pilots and crew chiefs. The process had to be conducted carefully, for booby traps were found, and several Me-262s had explosive devices in the cockpits.

The 54th personnel did not have to start totally from scratch: One flying Me-262 arrived at Lechfeld just be-

fore the war ended in Europe. The pilot surrendered to the 54th ADS personnel, already on scene, who enjoyed the sight of a heavily armed German pilot giving up without a fight.

Two English-speaking German test pilots also proved invaluable to the Whizzers. Ludwig Hofmann (dubbed "Willie") and Karl Baur (called "Pete"), both from Messerschmitt, taught the young Americans to fly the exotic jet.

Hofmann knew Charles A. Lindbergh from prewar encounters and had earned a reputation in Germany for fearlessly flying anything required of him.

Baur was equally competent, serving as the chief Messerschmitt test pilot. The Whizzers did not spend much time with Baur, as Watson took Baur with him on other flight test missions for captured aircraft.

The handful of German pilots and maintenance technicians had various reasons for cooperating. One was that it was a paying job. In postwar Germany, working 48 hours a week for the Americans was better than most Germans could hope for. And in one case, a Luftwaffe pilot was given the choice of flying with the Whizzers or going to prison camp.

The jet surrendered by the German pilot at Lechfeld is now on display at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. Marked with 49 kills (42 Soviet, five B-17s,



*The Me-262s used a nose-mounted Mk 108 cannon, firing 30 mm high-explosive shells that proved deadly to Allied bombers. Shown above is an Me-262 with a 50 mm nose-mounted cannon, under development before war's end.*

a P-47, and P-51), this fighter became known as *Dennis* when MSgt. Eugene Freiburger of the 54th named the jet after his son.

Thus began a tradition with the 54th personnel, who inspired the pilots that followed them into the Me-262s to again rename the jets to suit their own desires. The Whizzer pilot of *Dennis*, Holt, renamed it *Ginny H.* after his fiancée.

Another intact aircraft arrived on May 16, courtesy of Baur, who ferried it from Rhein-Main Air Base, where ATI personnel had located it in operational condition. The *Beverly Ann* was subsequently renamed *Screamin' Meemie* (for its noise) and today can be seen at the National Museum of the US Air Force in Dayton, Ohio.

The 54th also found an original factory trainer aircraft at Lechfeld still in a flyable state. After serving



**German aircraft line the deck of HMS Reaper on their way to the US. Once in America, they were ferried to Wright Field, Ohio, and Freeman Field, Ind., where they underwent extensive testing.**



**Members of the 54th Air Disarmament Squadron named the Me-262s while the jets were under their care. In turn, Watson's Whizzers would change the names. Above, airmen inspect some 262s with their American names visible.**

the American pilots faithfully, this Messerschmitt, nicknamed *Vera*, ultimately ended up at NAS Willow Grove, Pa., where it can be seen today. Thus, the first three aircraft acquired by the Whizzers remain on display to this day.

### Out With the Old

The majority of the team's aircraft, however, came from the efforts of the 54th, which built most of the jets from an odd collection of parts obtained from the wrecks at Lechfeld. Another task for the 54th

was insignia. The Nazi swastikas and crosses had to go. These were US jets now and needed to wear AAF insignia.

Watson trusted Strobell to lead the way in getting the pilots and ground crew trained and into the air. A nonflyable Me-262 came in handy as a training tool; the Messerschmitt people used it to teach maintenance and flight procedures. They tied the jet down and ran up its one good engine to provide a feel for this unfamiliar form of propulsion.

This ground tester also helped the

recovery team learn German instrumentation and starting procedures. To make their complicated challenge more manageable, each of the enlisted maintenance troops tried to specialize in a different aspect of the aircraft's components.

The 54th always had to scrounge for aviation fuel and ended up collecting all the diesel fuel it could get its hands on. When JP-1 could not be found, diesel worked as an alternate. (Army drivers had to watch their trucks or lose fuel in the name of intelligence.)

The team proceeded to overhaul all nine Lechfeld aircraft that ultimately made the cut for recovery to the United States. The first one completed became the Air Force museum's bird.

The Whizzers for the most part learned to fly the aircraft by getting checked out in the two-seat *Vera* on June 9. (See "Who Was First To Fly This Jet?" p. 66.) This checkout was extremely brief, yet seven minutes of in-flight instruction would be sufficient for these pilots to get the feel for the Messerschmitt. The next day, they took an Me-262 up solo for the ferry leg to Melun, France.

The morning of the 10th saw nine Me-262s lined up ready for the flight to Melun. Hofmann took *Vera* to Stuttgart, then to St. Dizier, France, before proceeding to Melun.

Led by Watson, the six American pilots and Baur ferried the remaining Me-262s on the short flight to Melun. For five of the American pilots, it



**Airmen tow a two-seat Me-262 out of a hangar. One two-seat trainer used by the Whizzers to learn to fly the jet fighter was dubbed Vera. That fighter today is on display at NAS Willow Grove, Pa.**

was their first time to solo in a jet, and their performance was flawless.

Before the aircraft could continue to the coast, the Whizzers had to wait for a special event to take place. Gen. Carl A. “Tooney” Spaatz wanted to see the Whizzers demonstrate their newfound jet-age skills.

More than two weeks passed, and the Whizzers busied themselves collecting other German aircraft, checking out a new pilot, renaming their aircraft, and even coming up with the name and the emblem that history remembers them by. They finally got their chance to show off before Spaatz on June 27, 1945.

### **Wicked**

Three jets took off to perform, but one had a landing gear problem and had to land. The other two executed high-speed passes for the general, while Strobell took this opportunity to do something none of them had done: aerobatics. His barrel roll impressed Spaatz so much he remarked to Watson, “Hal, that’s a wicked aeroplane.”

The next leg of the journey required the pilots to fly the jets to Cherbourg, France, so the treasures could be loaded on the British aircraft carrier HMS *Reaper*. The trips from Melun to Cherbourg began June 30 and continued through July 6. *Reaper* would deliver the ATI prizes to Newark, N.J.

On the first day, tragedy nearly claimed one of the Whizzers. One

Me-262 shed some turbine blades and crashed. German pilot Hofmann barely escaped, parachuting to safety. The other aircraft made the leg of the trip without loss, although one ended up in the wrong place when the pilot overshot Cherbourg in cloud cover and found himself too low on gas to make it to his primary destination. He landed his Me-262 safely on the Isle of Jersey.

The Whizzers got the operational Me-262s from Germany to the Cherbourg dock, where the jets were loaded onto *Reaper*, along with a number of more-traditional German propeller-driven aircraft bound for the US.

They departed France for Newark on July 19, 1945. The aircraft were then ferried to Wright Field and Freeman Field in Indiana, where much of the exploitation and testing of the foreign aircraft took place. ■

### **Who Was First To Fly This Jet?**

After learning the basics of the aircraft, 1st Lt. Robert C. Strobell, the Me-262 recovery team coordinator in Germany, decided he ought to be the Whizzer to take the first flight. In June 1945, Strobell suggested that former Messerschmitt test pilot Karl Baur fly a local checkout mission in an Me-262 known as *Beverly Ann*.

By Jeep, he interrupted the German’s return taxi and switched places with him, taking control of the aircraft himself. He let the US maintenance troops refuel the jet and proceeded to take an impromptu first jet ride.

Strobell had trouble taking off because he did not have enough ground speed and used all of the runway to get aloft. Once airborne, the leading edge slats scared him because they kept popping in and out at lower speeds, a phenomenon Americans had not yet experienced.

Strobell also learned the hard way that a jet does not slow down quickly with a decrease in throttle, and he overshot the field by 10 miles during his approach for landing. He also lowered the landing gear at excessive airspeed, and the nose wheel door popped his nose up another 20 degrees.

Other than that, his flight went well. Strobell was impressed by how smoothly the aircraft flew and how fast it was. Two of the other pilots walked up to Strobell after the flight and snapped the propellers off his Army Air Forces collar pins. He was a jet pilot now.

Col. Harold E. Watson technically preceded Strobell into the air on May 30 while on a checkout ride with Baur. Watson’s records also indicate that he flew a single-seat Me-262A-1a on June 3. Strobell’s flight records were destroyed later in a P-47 crash that almost killed him, so it will never be known for sure which American first soloed in the Me-262.

One thing is certain: The 54th’s operations officer, Captain Ward, beat them both for the honor of the first American to fly aboard an Me-262. Ludwig Hofmann, a former Messerschmitt test pilot, took him up in the two-seat *Vera* in mid-May 1945.

*Robert L. Young is the historian at the Air Force’s National Air and Space Intelligence Center, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. He has authored and coauthored two Air Force award-winning historical studies and published articles on foreign aircraft. This is his first article for Air Force Magazine.*