

# **54<sup>th</sup> AIR DISARMAMENT SQUADRON**

## **MISSION**

## **LINEAGE**

54<sup>th</sup> Air Disarmament Squadron

## **STATIONS**

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

## **COMMANDERS**

## **HONORS**

**Service Streamers**

**Campaign Streamers**

**Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

**Decorations**

## **EMBLEM**

## **MOTTO**

## **NICKNAME**

## **OPERATIONS**

At the end of WWII as hostilities were winding down in Europe, the Air Technical Service Command initiated "Project Lusty" charged with the task of collecting advanced German technology. On 27 Apr 1945 an outfit known as Watson's Whizzers came into being. Col. Harold E. Watson was tasked with acquiring German aerospace technology as the Allies took over German occupied areas. Watson and his outfit the 54th Air Disarmament Squadron were to scour the formerly German held territory with a hit list of aircraft to appropriate. At the top of the list was the Me 262 and several of the other German jets. Hence the term Watson's Whizzers, the jet engine having a very different sound from the typically deployed Allied aircraft. Often if the aircraft were in good condition they were flown back to England and later placed on board an aircraft carrier for the U.S..

MAY, 1945. Allied forces have finally overrun the German frontier after more than five years of bloody conflict. With the forces of the Reich demobilizing on all fronts, the victors quietly embark upon a battle of their own: a high-stakes competition to exploit captured technologies. It is already evident that the race for technological supremacy promises to shape the postwar era.

Some of the most unnerving German advances to emerge late in the war were embodied in the jet aircraft; especially the Messerschmitt 262. While the forces of the Wehrmacht were in a full retreat across the continent, this sleek warbird was a cause for great alarm among the Allies. At a time when the rest of the world's jet aircraft were little more than docile test beds, the Me 262 was sweeping the sky for intruding bomber formations. The potential for disaster had not gone unnoticed.

Of course, aggressive exploitation plans had been put into motion many months before V-E day. In the Army Air Forces, this gave rise to the Air Technical Intelligence (ATI) division. Charged with mounting an all-out dragnet for advanced weapons of all types, ATI operations were primarily focused upon a classified "blacklist" of priority targets. At the top of every list was the Messerschmitt 262. Field contact teams generally were finding little outside of a few wrecked jets. What was really needed was a collection of flyable examples.

Intelligence reports indicated that several Me 262s had been spotted on an airfield in Bavaria, just south of Augsburg. In fact, this was the home base for the main Messerschmitt factory. ATI Colonel Harold E. Watson sent a request throughout the theater of operations to assemble a small group of volunteers, drawn from the most capable pilots and mechanics available. Details were kept to a minimum, but the call for volunteers led to interviews for the most highly qualified. The best of the best were sent to Watson.

As the new team members filtered in, they were formally assigned to the project and finally informed of their highly classified mission: locate a squadron's complement of the Luftwaffe's most advanced jet aircraft, learn how to operate and maintain them, and stand by for orders to fly them out of Germany.

Talk about firsts: none of the men had ever actually seen a jet engine up close, none had ever flown a captured enemy aircraft, none had experience with swept wings, automatic wing slats, metric instrumentation or tricycle landing gear and none (save one) had ever even been "checked out" in a twin-engine plane.

Colonel "Hal" Watson was no stranger to flying new or unusual aircraft, and his engineering background made him a natural choice to lead the Air Technical Intelligence effort. Since the target lists he had been given included aircraft of all types, Watson divided the effort among two teams. One was dispatched in search of conventional aircraft, while the other team was charged with the jet mission. The pages which follow trace the history of the latter group.

While assigned to the 1st Tactical Air Force headquarters, Watson met a veteran P-47 pilot assigned to the staff there by the name of Lieutenant Robert C. Strobell. Although their duties rarely brought them into contact with one another, the two did have a rather odd opportunity to share a cockpit on one occasion. In early 1945, Watson received a request to fly back a stricken B-17 that was several miles away in France. Knowing that Strobell was a seasoned aviator, the Colonel made it a point to gather up Strobell on his way out of the door. Of course, the young fighter pilot had no great ambition to lumber about in a damaged bomber, but after a harrowing flight the two successfully recovered the plane. The Lieutenant's performance on that day clearly impressed Watson, for a few months later when word came down to assemble the exploitation teams, Strobell was immediately summoned to direct the efforts of the jet recovery group.

On the 20th of May, 1945, Strobell received orders assigning him to the mission. He recalls the meeting: Watson came into my office with a stack of documents on the Me 262, and simply told me to draw field gear, go to Lechfeld, teach mechanics to restore the Me 262 to flying condition, teach pilots to fly the jet, and prepare to ferry the jets out of Germany. The whole meeting lasted less than two minutes. I told him that I was delighted. He didn't bother to ask if I had any questions. Neither of us knew how to operate or fly the Me 262, and so there were no answers.

The intelligence reports that I had been given indicated that there were Me 262's on the field that could be restored to flight condition. At that time I understood that there was a German crew at Lechfeld working on the jets, but I had no knowledge of how many jets were on the field.

With a loose understanding that the rest of the team would meet him there, Strobell gathered his equipment and set out for the captured airfield on the 27th of May. He was understandably wary of what he would find there, as the area had fallen to the U.S. Army only two or three weeks before.

While the terms of a new surrender were in place, many pockets of resistance were rumored to be active, especially in southern Germany and Austria -- prime Me 262 country. To his way of thinking, Lechfeld was still very much "enemy territory." Strobell boarded a transport headed

southeast knowing that it was a one way ticket. When and if he was coming back, it would have to be in a Messerschmitt.

As his plane approached the German airbase at Lechfeld, Strobell noted considerable damage from the air: the runways had obviously been carpet-bombed and few buildings were intact. He also saw some of the planes. After landing, he got a closer look: there were jets all right, but most were in a state of serious disrepair. It appeared that many had been intentionally destroyed by the retreating Germans, and what little was left had fallen prey to souvenir-seeking soldiers and roving bands of displaced persons. He also noticed the acrid smell of brown coal oil -- something he had long associated with the enemy.

Upon reaching the ruins of some of the Messerschmitt facilities, he was relieved to see that a small group of Americans had preceded him onto the field. These men, from the 54th Air Disarmament Squadron, had arrived in the area a few weeks earlier with orders to preserve and safeguard as many Me 262s as possible.

The military government had succeeded in locating a number of German nationals living in the area who had worked on the Me 262 program. This group of tradesmen were then placed under contract as civilian employees to assist in the 54th ADS effort. Strobell took note of the German technicians, and deduced that this must have been the crew he was told to expect.

These men were all justifiably proud of the jet, and seemed content to give the Americans their full cooperation. In fact, they had apparently already succeeded in preparing several machines for flight.

A week prior to Strobell's arrival, the last of eight flight worthy 262s had been test flown, and two more were awaiting engines. The 54th ADS men were quick to make their mark upon the project by painting conspicuous names on the left side each of these airplanes. The right side of each jet bore their unofficial squadron name, borne of their constant squabbling: the Feudin' 54th.

Although none of the promised pilots were yet on hand, three or four of the crew chiefs assigned to Colonel Watson's project had arrived earlier that morning. He found them holed up in a bombed out hangar with their rifles at ready, awaiting their instructions. Although the language barrier had prevented them from communicating with the German crew, they reported that so far they had not encountered any problems.

While the men elected to stay in the hangar, Strobell spent the first few nights on the second floor of a bombed out administration building. Still wary of his surroundings, he kept his .45 nearby and laid a string of cans across the stairwell as a precaution.

The work of the ADS was done, and they left the field to Strobell and his mechanics on the 2nd of June. A day later, two more pilots arrived: Lieutenants Ken Holt and Roy Brown. They were followed in short order by Lieutenant Bob Anspach and the rest of the men.

Soon the entire team was assembled: six AAF pilots, 10 crew chiefs and some two-dozen German nationals. Watson was away tending to other matters and was rarely present during this time, but the men had a clear understanding of their mission, and set to work immediately.

Among their civilian employees were two English-speaking Messerschmitt test pilots: Ludwig Hofmann and Karl Baur. Both were cooperative and professional, though the men took an immediate liking to the more good-natured Hofmann, whom they began calling "Willie."

A personal friend of Charles Lindbergh's and a legendary aviator with a reputation throughout Germany, Hofmann had flown virtually every type of aircraft, to include the rocket-propelled Natter interceptor. Few knew the Me 262 better than the old pro, and he did his best to convey to the young Americans how to stay out of trouble in the jet.

The men learned from Baur that one of the aircraft (Beverly Ann) had been surrendered intact near Munich, and had been flown into Lechfeld prior to their arrival. Another was flown to Lechfeld directly and surrendered on VE Day. There was also an original factory trainer on site that still remained in a flyable state. Otherwise, they were told that the majority of the team's aircraft had been built from an odd collection of engines, various nose sections, landing gear components and parts scavenged from wrecks.

It was quickly decided that the ATI team should bring each of these aircraft back into the hangar for a closer inspection. The ADS effort had been done with some haste, and under minimal American supervision. No one could completely rule out thoughts of possible sabotage, and, perhaps more importantly, detailed inspections would give the crew chiefs a necessary opportunity to learn about the systems of the unusual aircraft.

As the work progressed, the mechanics found increasingly innovative ways of communicating with their German counterparts, and activities in the main hangar were in full swing. Inspecting, repairing and rebuilding was accomplished as necessary, with either Hofmann or Baur conducting a new test flight as each jet came out of the hangar.

Each crew chief was assigned a specialty area, and quickly became a subject matter expert, while the pilots rehearsed engine starts and reviewed performance characteristics on a damaged Me 262 that had been tethered to the ground. In the space of just over a week, all ten aircraft were refitted, checked out and ready to fly.

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Air Force Order of Battle

Created: 22 Aug 2012

Updated:

Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.