

Customs saves mysterious Messerschmitt

by Lisa Sweetapple

The actions, in 1979, of Sydney Customs officers stopped the illegal export of a World War II German fighter plane, the Messerschmitt Bf 109. The aircraft is earmarked for display within in the next three years, in Anzac Hall at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

The journey for the Bf 109 began in 1946 when it was packed in crates and sent to Australia from Oxfordshire, Britain.

Unfortunately the plane travelled without paperwork, but it is understood that it was sent to Australia as a gift from Britain for display in the National War Museum.

On its arrival in Australia, the Bf 109 was accessioned by the Australian War Memorial (AWM), but the plane remained in its crates at No. 1 Aircraft depot, Laverton, Victoria, and then Tocumwal, NSW, until it was relocated to the completed War Memorial store at Duntroon, Canberra, in 1955. The Bf 109 stayed packed away at

Duntroon until 1963 when the AWM Board of Trustees gave permission for the Bf 109 to be sold to a Mr B. Wetless, of Illawarra Flying School, for 250 pounds.

Finally, in February 1964, the Bf 109 went on display, but not until another change of ownership occurred. Mr Sid Marshall, of Marshall Airways, bought the plane from Mr Wetless. Mr Marshall hung the plane in his hangar at Bankstown.

In 1979, some years after the death of Mr Marshall, the Bf 109 came to the attention of a British collector who sought to export the aircraft to Britain. It was at this stage of the plane's journey that Customs officers became involved.

An export permit for the Bf 109 was denied due the rarity and historical significance of the plane.

Customs officers had been alerted to the movements of the plane and placed the Bankstown Airport on 24-hour surveillance for several



The fuselage of the recovered Messerschmitt, currently being restored by Australian War Memorial curators.



Australian War Memorial military technologist, Mr Michael Nelmes, inspects the engine housing of the Messerschmitt.

weeks before the plane was packed in air cargo crates and prepared for export. On 3 December 1979, Customs officers opened the crates to reveal the Messerschmitt in pieces without an export permit. The crates were seized by the Commonwealth and placed in storage at an Air Force base at Regents Park, NSW, while legal proceedings were undertaken.

The case was eventually settled in 1987 when solicitors acting for the British collector filed a notice of discontinuance, with each side paying its own costs and the verdict for Customs.

Vintage aircraft enthusiasts around the country were divided as to who should be given the seized plane, and whether it should be kept in Australia. Questions were asked in Parliament on a regular basis as progress of the investigation, as allegations of a deal to swap the Messerschmitt for a less significant aircraft were made.

After long legal proceedings, Customs won possession of the plane and handed it back to the AWM in 1987. Since then, the Messerschmitt has remained in

parts in a storage centre in Canberra. Curators will need to carefully remove some paint from the propeller and wings before the plane can be fully reassembled.

“Had it not been for the diligence of Customs officers, Australia would have lost one of its rarest – irreplaceable – aircraft specimens,” the *Aircraft* magazine reported in 1980.

The Australian War Memorial values this plane as part of its collection and is looking forward to resurrecting it so that it can take its place on display in the newly built ANZAC Anzac hall at the Australian War Memorial for all to observe and understand its significance in history.

Messerschmitt : the plane

In 1934, Professor Willy Messerschmitt designed the Messerschmitt Bf 109G-6, more commonly referred to as the Me 109, but correctly known as the Bf 109. Bf stands for Bayerische Flugzeugwerke, meaning it was built in a Bavarian factory, signifying it had been built by the Messerschmitt company.

Today, there are only 16 intact Bf 109's left in the world. A lot of aircraft in the 1950's and 60's were sold for scrap metal. An estimated 35,000 were produced by Germany during the Second World War II.

The Australian War Memorial has examples of three types of Messerschmitt single-seat fighter aircraft. The first was the Bf 109, which was propeller driven. This was followed by the a rocket-powered Me 163 and a jet-powered Me 262.

According to AWM military technologist, Mr Michael Nelmes, the Bf 109's 1800- horsepower V12

engine is unusual in that it is inverted.

“The reason for the upside-down engine was to improve the flow of oil through the engine.

“The Bf 109 is also supercharged as it has a compressor unit so that at high altitude it can compress the rarefied air. It is important for internal-combustion engines at high altitude to ensure that enough air gets into the carburettor, to mix with petrol, otherwise it won't run efficiently,” Mr Nelmes said.

The armament on the Bf 109 consisted of one 20mm or 30mm, which fired through the propeller spinner, and two MG 131 machine-guns above the engine which fired through the propeller disc. The front windshield was made of armoured glass, approximately five to six centimetres thick, providing protection from oncoming enemy fire.

The AWM considers itself lucky to possess the only Bf 109 in Australia and it is in remarkably good condition.

“One outstanding aspect of this particular aircraft is that it is the only surviving Second World War German plane with complete original paintwork in the world, and we have it,” Mr Nelmes said.

“The fact that it also has some bullet damage indicates that it most probably saw combat,” Mr Nelmes said.

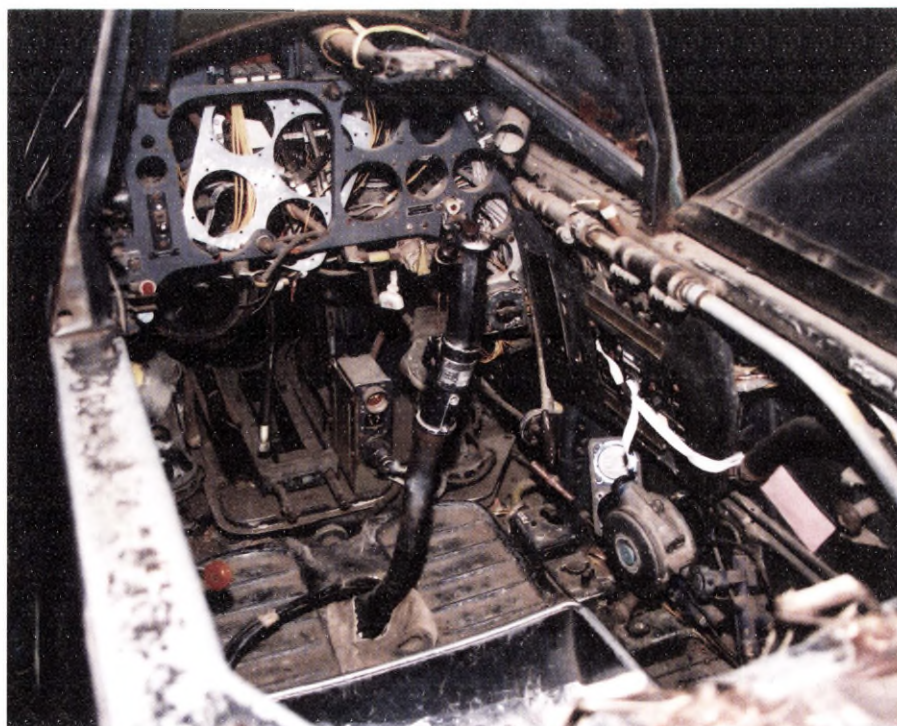
“The Bf 109 is significant on a few different levels. Firstly, it is the only one in Australia, and secondly, it was the most important German aircraft in the Second World War, and thirdly the Bf 109 is relevant to Australians as it was the plane that Australians fought against during the war.”

A letter to the AWM in 1990 by Mr Phillip Hilt, from West Germany, indicates that the aircraft was built at Messerschmitt's Regensburg factory around May 1944 as part of a batch of 550 Bf 109 planes. This is supported by the serial number, which is 163824.

Final assembly of the plane would most probably have been done at Regensburg-Obertraubling “Waldwerk Hagelstadt” — an assembly factory in the a forest. Test flying of the Bf 109 would then most probably have been performed by the two main test pilots, Herr Lohmann and Herr Ertl, at the Puchhof airfield.

An inscription painted below the cockpit on the body is one of the few clues to the history of the aircraft. It shows that the plane was refurbished on 31 December 1944 in Germany. Unfortunately, without papers, this is the last piece of information known about the aircraft.

The fact frustrating AWM curators is that the plane lacks any Luftwaffe unit identification. Without this identification, usually found on the body of the plane, AWM curators are unable to ascertain when the plane served, where it flew and what its role was in the war.



The stripped cockpit of the Messerschmitt