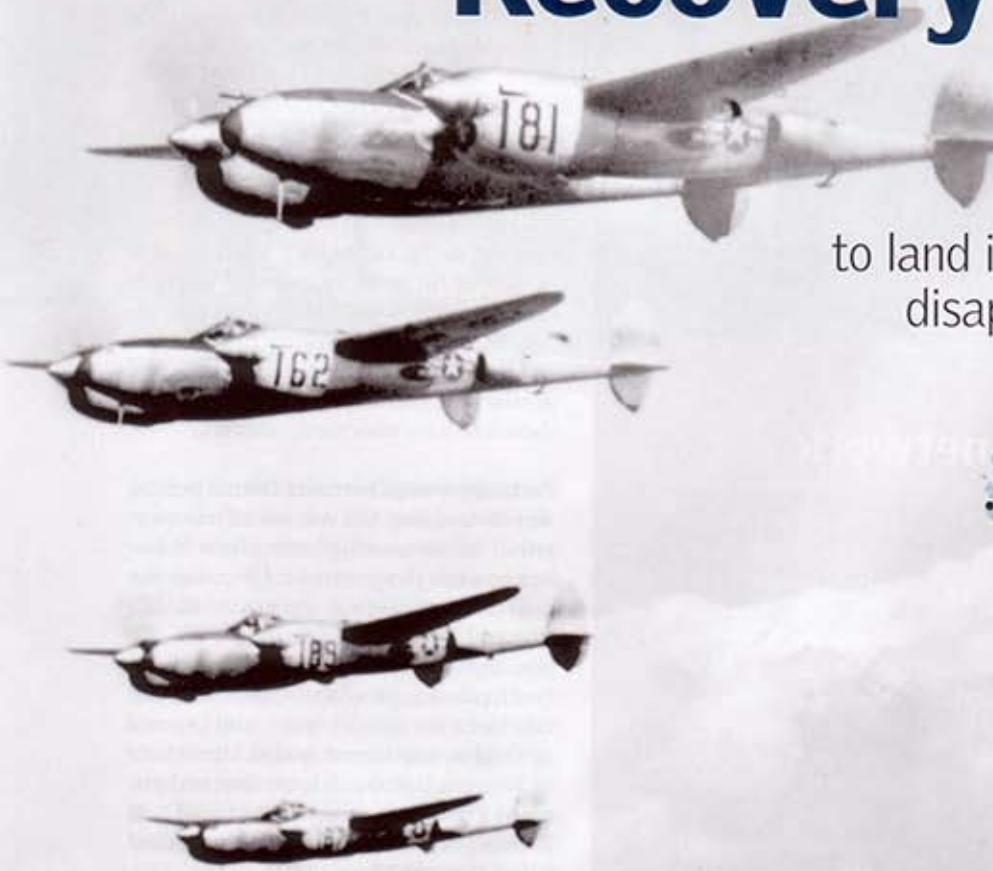




The Lost Squadron Recovery Mission

P-38 Lightnings ruled the skies during WWII. Six of them were forced to land in Greenland, then slowly disappeared under a glacier...



[Text] Kevin Cote

Lost in ice: P-38s were forced down by wicked weather on the frozen coast of southern Greenland.



Rough landing: One plane flipped when its front wheel hit a crevice during the emergency landing. All of its dashing crew survived.

The P-38 Lightning was the hottest thing in the skies of daring and doom that loomed over Europe, the Pacific and North Africa at the start of the summer of 1942. The plane's twin-engines represented a radical departure in fighter aircraft design. A droning P-38 made twice as much noise as a P-51 Mustang, but it packed over twice the firepower.

The best and brightest pilots of the war scrambled to chase enemy aircraft and destroy enemy ground installations in the P-38. America's most celebrated flying ace, Richard Ira Bong, responsible for 40 documented "kills" before he was 25, flew a P-38 Lightning. Its double-engine design meant that when one was damaged in combat, the other engine could bring the pilot home to safety.

But the Lightning's large fuel capacity and its resultant extended range is what made it a boon for Allied war planners. Invading continental Europe required a massive buildup of fighter planes and bombers at airstrips on the coast of England. But getting planes there from America was a problem. Conventional fighter planes lacked the range to cross the Atlantic. Transporting them by ship was risky due to the threat of German U-boats. But, with extra fuel tanks, Lightnings could fly from their factory in Maine, stop in Canada, fly on to Greenland for more fuel, and stop again in Iceland before reaching their destination in England. This was Operation Bolero,

one of the most successful logistical missions of World War II. In it, hundreds of giant American B-17 bombers and P-38 Lightnings flew unmolested half way around the world to bases from which they would go on to cause unspeakable horror, but win the war.

The first squadron of B-17 bombers and Lightning escorts successfully reached England in June 1942. But in early July a squadron of two B-17 bombers and six Lightnings encountered rough weather between Greenland and Iceland, came off course, and had to turn back and force land on the east coast of Greenland. The 25 airmen survived and were rescued a few days later by a team traveling on dogsleds, and picked



{ Allan Greisen }

»We've learned from the mistakes of our US colleagues.«

up by a ship waiting at the coast. But their planes were left behind. For years they were visible at high altitudes to pilots flying northern transatlantic routes, and they became affectionately known as "The Lost Squadron." But they eventually began to sink slowly into the vast glacier that is Greenland, and disappear. But not forever. In 1992 a US-financed recovery team successfully melted a hole 70 meters deep and salvaged one of the six Lightnings. The event was covered in National Geographic Magazine. The plane, dubbed "Glacier Girl," was restored at the cost of millions of dollars, and went on to fly in local air shows and be seen in Martin Scorsese's film, "The Aviator."

The other five Lightnings, rare because there are only a few of the revolutionary aircraft left surviving, and the two B-17 bombers they were escorting are hibernating darkly like steel dinosaurs beneath a half a century of snow and ice 150 kilometers west southwest of Tasiilaq, on the frozen eastern coast of Greenland. Over the years their position has shifted, but they remain in a cluster spread over a few square kilometers.

"They are there, and we will get them," says Dieter Herrmann, a German journalist and pilot who founded an organization called Lost Squadron Recovery, which plans to set out for the treacherous ice cap of Greenland and recover as many of the remaining Lightnings as possible. There has been >



First success: A 1992 US mission used a "gopher" (left) to melt a series of holes to the first P-38. Then the team began a perilous descent.

It could be the most spectacular recovery of WWII relics, ever.



support from the government of Denmark, which administers Greenland, and academic institutions. But funding has been a perennial problem.

Early this year, a sponsorship deal was signed with Fortis, the Swiss maker of high end pilots' watches. It is bankrolling a recovery expedition next March, and plans to use the adventure as a way of promoting its products.

If successful, it will be one of the most spectacular recovery missions for WWII hardware ever. It already represents a major logistics challenge, incorporating the transport of sophisticated machinery and supplies to a base camp at the recovery site, shuttling in a small army of 200 specialists, journalists and volunteer workers, uncovering, dismantling and raising the Lightnings from their chilly grave, then shipping them, and the equipment, back off the ice cap.

Herrmann says inspections by scientists at Iceland's University of Reykjavik revealed the locations of all five Lightning P-38s, and that they were probably not fully crushed by decades of build-up of ice. To get them up, Herrmann

has assembled a team of logistics specialists including Lasse Rungholm, an attorney and adventurer, who is one of the few people to have navigated across Greenland's ice cap on wheels; Allan Greisen, a professional boat pilot and diver who built melting equipment to sear a channel down to the planes; and Ullrich Malcke, a traffic engineering consultant.



{ Dieter Herrmann }

»The P-38 planes are there... and we will get them.«

One indication of the challenge facing them is that they are only the latest in a long line of enthusiasts who have set out to liberate the Lost Squadron. Since the aircraft were first discovered in the early 1980s, there have been 12 recovery efforts, all failing for various reasons, until the successful mission in 1992. Herrmann says the budget for this one is 2.5 million euros. The legalities of making off with rare war relics are the least of Herrmann's problems. "It's pretty uncomplicated," he says. "Greenland's laws say anything found belongs to the finder, and the US military has officially abandoned the planes."

Infinitely more complicated is getting the eight containers of recovery gear, including three giant 30-kilowatt electrical generators, and other supplies to the site. Though the Lost Squadron is on the edge of the ice on the east coast of the frozen island, the port there is only free of ice in July and August, which leaves too small a window for the recovery before the winter sets in.

So the containers will be shipped by Deutsche Bahn's Schenker subsidiary

1

Base camp:

Scientists, engineers, volunteers and journalists camped on the glacier will be supplied by weekly flights.



2

»The kennel«:

A custom-made steel construction will use heat and its own weight to bore a 1.5 x 6 meter shaft through the glacier to the plane. It will move at a rate of some seven meters a day, depending on conditions.

3

Shaft: 900 cubic meters of ice will be pumped to the surface before the team descends and carves out a cavity to work in. Temperature in the cave be about 0 degrees Celsius.

4

Chill room: Air from pneumatic tools will provide oxygen as workers dismantle the fighters and bring parts back up to the surface, one by one.

Against the elements – and the clock: Adverse weather means the team has only a small amount of time to rescue the planes.



Intact: The P-38 recovered in 1992 survived 50 years under the ice. What about the others?

from Germany at the end of March 2007 to arrive at the port at Sisimiut on Greenland's west coast in April and then begin a three-day, 500-kilometer journey on sleds pulled by Pisten Bullys to the recovery site across the southern tip of the island. "The route is easy. You just keep going straight and make sure you don't hit any abandoned US radar stations," quips Lasse Rungholm.

The real excitement will start once the Lost Squadron site is reached. First the camp will have to be set up and cleared of polar bears. Additional workers and supplies will be flown in from the Kulusuk airport. Only then will Allan Greisen fire up his steam-powered, custom-made contraption that will be used to melt a shaft 100 meters deep in the ice to reach the planes in their icy tomb.

It's called the "kennel" because the wedge resembles an inverted doghouse. Lowered slowly by a crane, it will melt a 1.5 x 6-meter vertical shaft in the glacier that should reach the plane in about 15 days. As the kennel slowly burns through the ice, the shaft it leaves behind will be as strong as concrete, insuring the walls do not cave in and trap the workers below. The 1992 recovery implemented a more complicated boring scheme, which required a number of smaller holes to be melted through the glacier. "We've learned from the mistakes of the Americans," said Greisen when interviewed by *Flugzeug Classic* magazine.

Some 900 cubic meters of melted ice will be pumped up to the surface before a Lightning is reached. Then Greisen and a handful of other daring souls will descend the icy shaft with Kärcher steam guns, free the plane, and create a small cavern in which to begin disassembling it. Though they will be at close quarters and deep below the surface of Greenland, there will be enough air to breathe. Oxygen will be provided by the pneumatic tools used by the adventurers to dismantle the fighters. It will be an eerie and uncomfortable environment; body heat from the workers will keep temperatures a relatively warm 0 degrees Celsius in the cavity, but ice above will be melting constantly, raining on the mechanics as they remove the wings and motors from the aircraft's fuselage and send them back up the shaft.

The recovery team has budgeted about one month for locating, accessing and liberating each of the five planes. The whole mission has to be wrapped up by mid-October. Herrmann says the first plane is going to be donated to a museum in Copenhagen. He would like to see the German Museum of Technology in Berlin take another. The other three, if they succeed in getting them, will be sold for about \$2 million a piece. Unrestored, that is. Herrmann reckons a fully restored Lightning is worth some \$14 million. ■ www.lost-squadron.org