



Written by Lutz Warsitz (translated by Geoffrey Brooks); Published by Pen and Sword Aviation. Soft cover, 176 pages. ISBN 978 1 84415 818 8.

## The First Jet Pilot—The Story of German Test Pilot Erich Warsitz

Reviewed by **Rob Neil**

This book is nothing short of a gem for anyone interested in real aviation history.

I could end the review there, because in my opinion, that one sentence sums up everything about the book. However, readers will probably want to know why I thought it was so good—and the author and publisher might want me to say a bit more!

The book is—as the title suggests—the story of the world’s very first jet pilot, the author’s father, Erich Warsitz, who became a test pilot for the German Luftwaffe in the years immediately before World War Two.

Some readers might be reluctant to pick up a book that has been “translated”, as the word almost invariably implies a disjointed and difficult-to-read text. Thankfully, nothing could be further from the truth. Not only has the translator, Geoffrey Brooks, done an excellent job of translating the author’s words extremely readably, he also appears to have grasped all the subtleties of humour and personality intended by the author.

Making the work even more readable is the style chosen by Lutz Warsitz to present his father’s story. It could easily have been a dry historical narrative compiled from information that Erich Warsitz provided his son. Instead, Lutz Warsitz has written the book as a pseudo “autobiography” as if it were written in the first person by Erich Warsitz himself.

I suggest this would have been rather difficult for anyone but Erich’s son. For a volume about a subject of immense historical importance to aviation, such a style could easily have been a disaster. However, Lutz Warsitz has pulled it off beautifully and the book is truly fascinating from both historical and personal perspectives. It was far more “readable” than I expected.

The author says he spent a year “interviewing” his father when researching the book. Having privileged access to Erich Warsitz’s priceless diaries and notes must have been an enormous help in his research. The result is a book that “is” Erich Warsitz telling his own story.

*The First Jet Pilot* corrects many commonly held misconceptions—for example, that the Heinkel 176 (the rocket-powered predecessor to the He-178) was “privately funded” and that it was developed out of sight (and without the approval) of the German authorities. However, he tells the amusing and fascinating stories about numerous other “secrets” that were kept from the bureaucrats and German administration.

Because the Allies won the war, it was Allied scientists, aircraft manufacturers and pilots who became famous—often by utilising the results of German research and testing efforts. Before

corresponding with the author, I had not heard of Erich Warsitz. His name was there in the history books, but it was never highlighted adequately and was always overshadowed by names like Heinkel and von Braun. (In much the same way, while most aviation buffs know that the first British Jet was the Gloster Whittle E.28/39, many might not know its test pilot was Flt Lt Gerry Sayer.)

*The First Jet Pilot* goes some small way to correcting the historical imbalance of recognition and highlights the massive debt that everyone in aviation owes to pioneers like Erich Warsitz. These men (and women, like Hanna Reitsch) were incredibly brave to test new aircraft, untried engines and unknown aerodynamic hurdles. Many of them died—suddenly and frighteningly. Were it not for their efforts and sacrifices, we certainly would not be enjoying the ability to travel around the world with “effortless” ease in shirt-sleeved comfort as we do today.

Thankfully, Erich Warsitz survived his test-flying days. This was a major feat when flying some of the most deadly test aircraft ever to hazard the sky (and their pilots). It was even more impressive when one considers the pressure upon manufacturers and pilots under conditions of wartime urgency.

Having survived WWII as well as his hazardous test-flying career, Erich Warsitz—like many German survivors—suffered significantly at the hands of the Russians after the war. After kidnapping him with the intention of forcing him to cooperate with them in their jet and rocket research—which he refused to do—the Russians sent Erich Warsitz to Siberia.

*The First Jet Pilot* only gives a brief summary of Erich Warsitz’s Russian ordeal and his life after the war. While the rest of the book made me want to know more, it isn’t the book’s purpose. (My only complaint about *The First Jet Pilot* is that it isn’t longer!)

Instead, through Lutz Warsitz’s words, readers share the emotions—apprehension, loyalty, fear, frustration and elation—of being part of some of aviation’s most significant advances. Despite the difficulties in sourcing images (so many German images were either destroyed during the war or taken by one or another of the “victors” afterwards), the author has come up with a marvellous selection of pictures, many of which have never been published before.

*The First Jet Pilot* will remain a treasured addition to my bookshelf because of the way it brings (forgotten) history to life. Lutz Warsitz has done an excellent job and his effort would undoubtedly have made his father proud. A thoroughly recommended read. **PW**