

Custom-designed supercomputer named for local WWII codebreaker

By Jim DeBrosse, Staff Writer

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WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE — The Air Force Research Laboratory's newest supercomputer — the 308th-fastest device in the world — will take its name from a pioneer in computer development, Dayton codebreaker Joe Desch.

The "Desch," a custom-designed SGI Altix ICE 8200 the size of seven refrigerators side-by-side, will be unveiled this morning, Aug. 31, in a ceremony at the base attended by Desch's daughter, Debbie Anderson. "This is the stuff he loved," Anderson said last week. "He'd want to know exactly how it worked."

A team of researchers at Wright-Patt will use the new supercomputer to translate massive amounts of radar surveillance data into high-resolution, 3-dimensional video images for observing activity over an entire city — down to someone lighting a cigarette — any time of day or night and in any weather.

Built by Silicon Graphics Inc. of Fremont, Calif., the Desch cost \$2.2 million and has enough storage to challenge even a music-loving teenager — 87 terabytes, or enough for 25 million iPod tunes, base officials said.

Mike Minardi, a researcher in the Sensors Directorate, said his interest in Dayton's codebreaking history led to the idea of honoring Desch, who designed a computer during World War II that helped the Allies crack the Nazi Enigma codes.

In a secret ceremony in 1947, Desch was awarded the nation's highest civilian honor for war-time service, the Presidential Medal of Merit. He died in 1987 at age 80, having never told anyone of his achievement.

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