

***The Decisive Duel: Spitfire Vs. 109* by David Isby, published by Little, Brown
<http://www.SpitfirevsBf109.com>**



THE DECISIVE DUEL: SPITFIRE VS. 109
Why I Wrote This Book
David Isby

The Decisive Duel: Spitfire vs. 109 published in by Little Brown in London, is a “dual biography” of two of that conflict’s most significant fighter planes: the British Supermarine Spitfire and the German Messerschmitt Bf 109.

This subject matter area was a homecoming for me. Second World War military aviation is the subject matter I grew up with. I write about it as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about country vicarages. It defined the world I grew up in. Before I was born, it had shaped my family’s experience. My father flew with the Eighth Air Force. My mother saw the decisive air battles over London on 15 September 1940 and later worked in the British aircraft industry. My grandfather, a RAF instructor, helped fight fires after German bombs had devastated his airfield on 15 August 1940. I grew up hearing the stories and, later, reading about the aircraft and events all my life. I have since become a pilot and an author (this is my twenty-sixth book written or edited).

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That is where *The Decisive Duel's* story starts. With my mother. Watching a Spitfire over London on the afternoon of 15 September 1940. I started there, and not at an airfield, in a hangar, an operations room, or in a cockpit, because, while this is a book about two airplanes, it is a story about people. The story I set out to tell is not just about brilliant aircraft designers, far-sighted air marshals, or skillful and courageous fighter pilots, though the story certainly has all those people. It is also a story about teenage girls and their middle-aged dads. These aircraft touched the lives not only of those that flew or built them, but also of whole nations.

While I set out to tell a story about people, in writing a book about airplanes, I found out that I inevitably had to talk about technology. I had to look very carefully at what I needed to explain. It was really important that the readers see the difference between a two-speed supercharger and a two-stage supercharger.

Got that? There will be a quiz afterwards.

I had to explain seemingly arcane point of technology this because it is important to the story of the two airplanes. If I did not explain it, the reader would not know the explanation for what happened in the skies over northern France in 1942. The Germans were flying Bf 109Gs (with two-speed superchargers on their engines). The British showed up with Spitfire IXs (with a two-stage supercharger, the latest from Rolls-Royce). That changed the course of air combat over northern Europe. The 109E and the Spitfire I had been evenly balanced in the decisive summer of 1940, each with strengths that balanced the others' limitations. In 1941, the 109F had the upper hand over the Spitfire V. Now, never again would the 109 have a performance advantage.

I had to make the reader care about the difference between a two-speed supercharger and a two-stage supercharger. If it is just antique technology, it is only of antiquarian interest. Today, no one would build a great big piston engine to power an airplane. They can use a turbine, much simpler and more efficient. I had to show, not just tell, why it was important in 1942 and how it shaped the interconnected stories of the Spitfire and 109 and its people. So you get to read about the RAF fighter pilots such as Al Deere and Johnnie Johnson that took Spitfire IXs into battle and the German fighter pilots, demanding explanations from their intelligence officers why the Spitfire had become a more lethal opponent.

So writing about the Spitfire and the Bf 109 meant writing about technology. No one book can tell the whole story, just as no technology is appropriate for all contingencies. Similarly, with people, you can't include everyone. With a history, you have less leeway. But, remember, I was writing a biography of two airplanes. So while a history has to have the order of battle and the chain of command, I needed to be selective in whom I talked about.

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This can skew your history. One of my sources on the German side of the air war was General Adolf Galland, the fighter ace who will, more than any other pilot, always be associated with the 109. He survived, spoke good English, and made sure that his views were the ones heard after the war. This became especially valuable as the Luftwaffe burned most of its operational documents such as war diaries at the end of the war. He was also extremely charismatic, the kind of person many readers enjoys reading about. So he gets written about a lot. Those doing the writing tended to look to Galland as a source. All military history tends to emphasize those individuals that make a good story or those that left good records. So Galland got to be one of the people who tell the story of the 109.

But remember I told you this story is also about teenage girls and middle aged dads as well as fighter aces. So I bring in Elli Friedmann, 16 years old, to tell about building bomb release mechanisms at Messerschmitt's Augsburg factory in 1944. She was an enslaved worker, but one, having survived Auschwitz, that was glad for the increased opportunity for survival offered by working in the German aircraft industry. She is also part of the 109 story and, along with Galland and many others, she gets to tell it. It is the people that show us that while the Spitfire and the 109 were in many ways alike, and the RAF and the Luftwaffe were comparable organizations, Britain and Nazi Germany were profoundly and fundamentally different. Erhard Milch is in the story because he is in many ways the brains behind the Luftwaffe (or at least he thought so). But he is also a middle-aged dad. Except that his teenage daughter has Down's syndrome. So he's got to succeed, not just to bring Germany victory (and enrich himself), but also to keep his daughter safe from Nazi euthanasia.

The stories about people and the explaining about technology often intersect. You now know the difference between two-speed and two-stage superchargers. Well, Hermann Goering did not. He did not know and did not care. So when the Luftwaffe fighter pilots told him that they were getting shot down by Spitfire IXs (the ones with the two-stage supercharger) in their 109Gs (the ones with the two-speed supercharger), he told them it was because they were a pack of cowards.

Not a good idea. Goering was more than wrong. He was evil. World-class evil. He worked with Himmler in implementing the Holocaust. He earned that death sentence at the Nuremburg trials. So, when Germany's fighter pilots, with Galland in the lead, told their stories, first when being interrogated as prisoners of war and then when they wrote their memoirs, it was easy and not inaccurate to blame Goering. But it was also convenient. The realities of the Luftwaffe's failures were more complex than one man. The professionals, the generals and, yes, the fighter pilots made bad decisions that did more harm than those of Goering. The generals did not have an answer to the fighter pilots, for all their claimed professionalism. Nor did Dr. Willy Messerschmitt, designer of the 109.

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So I had to reflect this in the book, always keeping in mind that my subject is the 109 and its duel with the Spitfire. I was only going to talk about how the Luftwaffe made decisions and implemented them to the extent it affected the 109 story. It would have been a lot easier to say “Galland says it was all Goering’s fault”. And certainly a lot of it was. And I say that. But I read enough stenographic records of high-level conferences to know that the problems that undercut the 109 and its pilots were bigger than even Herman Goering. Goering blustered. The generals could not make things work. Willy Messerschmitt moved on to more exciting projects.

Which is unfortunate, because powerful villains make good characters in historical writing as much as they do in fiction. Similarly, brilliant innovators confronting hidebound bureaucracies also make a good story. Willy Messerschmitt told this story about himself, and his revolutionary design for the 109, and how it eventually proved so good that even Berlin had to go along with him and order it into production. It certainly is a good story. I quote him on this. But the evidence points that Willy Messerschmitt was not as much an outside nor was the bureaucracy as set against them as he said years later. Reconciling a good story and accurate history is never easy.

Narrative is powerful, but it can easily mislead. We can string disjointed facts and events together in to a cohesive story that is of our own devising. But there are a lot of stories here along with the people and the airplanes. The people that drove these events are critical to the story of the Spitfire and the 109. Their duel, starting before they each flew and running to the end of the Second World War, shaped that conflict. That duel, and what its legacy means today, was the story that I set out to tell in *The Decisive Duel: Spitfire Vs. 109*.