

## THE DECISIVE DUEL: Spitfire vs. 109 It Still Matters

The Spitfire still matters. There is a reason why the British Supermarine Spitfire, the most famous fighter plane of the Second World War, remains a symbol that retains its power. Battle of Britain Memorial Flight fly-overs have become part of the way great state occasions are marked, such as the 2011 Royal Wedding and the 2012 Diamond Jubilee. Earlier this year, prime minister David Cameron himself made the public announcement from Downing Street that it was thought that twenty Spitfires, buried in their packing cases in Burma in 1945, had potentially been rediscovered could be unearthed. Prime ministers rarely venture into the rather arcane field of aviation archeology.<sup>1</sup> Part of the reason was to be able to announce an example of cooperation with the government in Burma after it had taken steps away from authoritarian rule. But it is unlikely that without the associations of the Spitfire name that a British prime minister would have made such an announcement. The name itself conjures up a past people can invest with their emotions and significance for their own lives.

While writing my book, *The Decisive Duel: Spitfire vs. 109*, published by Little Brown in London, I came to realize that both the Spitfire and its German counterpart the Messerschmitt Bf 109 both remain more than interesting examples of outdated technologies. Vintage automobiles and preserved steam locomotives are both those things. But no one used to die in them. These aircraft are the most substantial of artefacts, that present the past not as a construct, perceptions and prejudices agreed upon, but as evidence of actual world-shaping events, however open to changing interpretation. Historic artefacts, no matter how well preserved and how perceptively curated, present but shadows of the world in which they once played a vital, even decisive, role. Yet they are important as a link to the past, without which the present is chaos and the future unreadable.

The Spitfire was a legend and a symbol even while the war was in progress. That is why Britain collected money for the Spitfire Fund during the war. A film based on R.J. Mitchell's life and his development of the Spitfire was a major 1942 cinematic release. No other aeroplane of the Second World War carries the same associations, a part of history contributing to today's sense of identity. The Spitfire will always invoke the Battle of Britain, part of the Second World War when Britain was alone and forced to defend itself, without moral dilemmas to trouble the post-modern observer.

The Spitfire remains a British icon. In an age where Britain cannot build an aeroplane by itself and its international role has become that of a junior partner in coalitions, the Spitfire is a symbol of British innovation, unique greatness and, above all,

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/9203822/Spitfires-buried-in-Burma-during-war-to-be-returned-to-UK.html>

skill and courage in self-defence. Anything powerful – symbols, memory, the past itself – makes people perceive it as part of what they are. They try to control or use it. In 2009, the fringe British National Party made the news when it used a photograph of a Spitfire as a nationalist image on a poster opposing immigration from eastern Europe. This turned into self-parody when they selected a photograph of a Spitfire belonging to one of the RAF's Polish squadrons.<sup>2</sup>

History is important, even if its political expression often tends to be in the form of over-generalization and inaccurate clichés. The Spitfire still projects an image, one the BNP clumsily attempted to appropriate. The Spitfire is recognisable to those who are only experiencing it as received history or through stories told by their relatives. It retains a degree of worldwide and national emotional investment that no object, and certainly no other aeroplane, possesses.

The legend of the Bf 109 is different. Germany remains proud of its history of technological innovation. The Deutsches Museum in Munich, close to the university where Willy Messerschmitt earned his degree, has among its exhibits a Bf 109E and a Me 262, the two aircraft designs of which, in his long career, he was most proud. They are remembered as masterpieces of aircraft engineering. A preserved Bf 109 in Luftwaffe markings represents an artefact of Hitler's Germany, evoking high-performance fighter planes and brave pilots, contesting the skies, not the distant enemy in Berlin committed to murder and conquest. However different the two sides were, their aircraft were similar, as were their fighter pilots and the squadrons they flew in. Both fighters' stories had similar characters: the brilliant designer, the brave fighter pilots, all volunteers; ground crews and factory workers, often conscripts during the war. But the Bf 109's story includes many characters who had no counterpart when writing about the Spitfire: the totalitarian and criminal national leadership, the failed Luftwaffe leaders, the enslaved workers, and the heroic, yet nameless, saboteurs. The Spitfire and the Bf 109 were similar aircraft, designed and flown by similar men, but have become, through their parallel stories, vastly differently as artefacts and, ultimately, as symbols.

It was this symbolic power, invoking the past and those who lived through its events, that have been incorporated as part of great public occasions or, less successfully, enlisted in aid of political causes. In my book, I traced how the basic Spitfire design was adapted to many missions: fighter-bomber, reconnaissance, carrier operations, even as a floatplane. Now, almost 80 years after its was first designed, the Spitfire is still making history in the skies over London. Not in combat, but as a form of invoking a shared and ultimately victorious past to come to the aid of an uncertain future.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'BNP Uses Spitfire in Anti-immigration Poster', *The Daily Telegraph* (4 March 2009), [Internet edn, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/4935429/BNP-uses-Polish-Spitfire-in-anti-immigration-poster.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/4935429/BNP-uses-Polish-Spitfire-in-anti-immigration-poster.html).

Field Code Changed