

Excerpt from:
THE DECISIVE DUEL: SPITFIRE VS. 109
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From Chapter 7 – “Sandy” Lane’s Duel With a Bf 109 Over London, 15 September 1940

At about 1450, the oncoming planes appeared distant to ‘Sandy’ Lane. He was leading 19 Squadron over the Thames, east of London, as part of Bader’s ‘big wing’, attacking the German formations.ⁱ They started to move, growing bigger, then catching the slanting rays of the early afternoon sun; more aeroplanes than he had ever seen before. They were all German, thirty Do 17s with Bf 109 and Bf 110 escorts, stacked up to 30,000 feet, and all flying away from him and the other Spitfires of 19 Squadron.

The Spitfire squadrons were to attack the escort while Bader and the Hurricane squadrons attacked the bombers. Once Lane had seen the German formation, he made sure his two wingmen were with him, one on each wing in the RAF’s ‘vic’ fighting formation. One of them, Flight Sergeant George ‘Grumpy’ Unwin,ⁱⁱ was 19 Squadron’s leading ace, with eight victories. Lane slowly pushed the throttle forward – the Merlin engine’s 1175 hp kicked in as the Spitfire accelerated – and quickly armed the eight machine guns with a twist of his gloved trigger finger. He checked the reflector sight behind the windscreen. It was set at the bright ‘daylight’ position for illumination of the circular range-finding rings that would bracket a Bf 109’s wingspan at 250 yards, where all eight machine guns were harmonised to strike together in an area the size of a Bf 109’s cockpit. All three Spitfires went into a climbing turn, aiming to get behind and below the Bf 109s for an attack.

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A flash of tracer bullets – three Bf 109s dived on the Spitfires from above. They fired from straight ahead of the Spitfires; rather than pulling deflection, they tried a head-on shot. The combined closing speed of the fighters brought them together at some 700 mph. The Bf 109s had almost instantly grown from specks to full-size planes, their light-blue bellies a few feet above the Spitfire's canopy.

Two of the Bf 109s broke away to starboard, followed by Lane's wingmen. A swirling dogfight then followed. 'Grumpy' Unwin said, 'The next thing I knew, literally thousands of yellow-nosed Messerschmitts were whistling by me less than 100 yards away, so I pulled the bloody stick back, went into a steep turn and held it there.'

Lane went for a formation of Bf 110s before seeing a single Bf 109, probably one of the three that had attacked him moments before, just above him. Without a wingman, the vulnerable Bf 109 would be his target. 'Pulling around half stalled, I tore after him.'

The Spitfire was in a near-vertical bank. It turned to get behind the Bf 109s that had just overshot his section. Lane kept his eyes focused ahead as his peripheral vision faded towards a blackout. Increasing g-forces compressed him into his seat. Still he turned, on the verge of a stall.

Now he was behind and below the Bf 109, whose pilot had probably lost sight of him. Lane's Spitfire was in his blind spot. 'I got in a short burst as I closed on him before he was out of my sights again.' Alerted, the Bf 109's pilot went into a tight turn, aiming to get on Lane's tail.

'That German pilot certainly knew how to handle a 109 – I have never seen one thrown about as that one was.' But Lane was able to turn inside the Bf 109. He swivelled

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his head around. He checked his rear-view mirrors, 'clearing his tail'. Lane had added a second mirror to his Spitfire, so important did he consider them to keeping an effective lookout. He strained against the shoulder straps that held him in the seat in his cockpit as he turned from side to side. Shifting his vision to the illuminated rings on the reflector sight, he pushed the trigger button on the Spitfire's control column, holding it down for about two seconds.

'Get in close. Get in close. When you think you're too close, get in closer.'

Douglas Bader's advice to his pilots reflected his direct and blunt personal approach to defeating all obstacles. 'Sailor' Malan's first rule of air fighting was, 'Wait till you see the whites of his eyes.' In other words, a fighter pilot often fired so close to his enemy that, on several occasions in the battle, RAF fighters were hit by pieces they had shot off enemy aircraft and were forced down themselves.

'Twice I managed to get in a short burst but I don't think I hit him.'

The Bf 109's pilot hauled it around in a tight turn, its leading-edge slats springing out to keep it flying on the verge of a stall, doubtless craning his neck hard around to keep in sight the Spitfire hunting him down.

'He was obviously turning as tightly as his kite could and I could see his slats were open, showing that he was nearly stalled. His ailerons were obviously snatching too, as first one wing and then the other would dip violently.' This suggests that the slats might have been jamming, with some not extending properly. The effect would be to create an asymmetric flight condition or, worse, stall one wing of the Bf 109.

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Still in a tight turn, Lane saw the Bf 109 getting closer and closer to being in his gunsight. With the Spitfire about to open fire, the Bf 109's pilot decided to play his plane's strong card, superior acceleration in a dive. It half-rolled and dived away, heading for a cloud deck beneath the fight, with Lane following. 'He flew on inverted for several seconds, giving me the chance to get in a good burst from that quarter.' This time, Lane's gloved finger held down the button for a full five seconds of concentrated fire from the Spitfire's eight Browning machine guns.

The Bf 109's superior dive acceleration allowed him to open the range. 'Half righting himself for a moment, he slowly dived down and disappeared into the clouds, still upside down.' While Lane claimed it as a 'probable', German records show no Bf 109 likely to have been lost at the time and place of this combat.

'Grumpy' Unwin had finished his dogfight in much the same way. 'I gave the odd machine a quick burst as it flew past me and succeeded in forcing one to half roll and dive into cloud below. I followed him down, but my windscreen froze at 6,000 feet and he escaped.'

The exertion demanded in even a short manoeuvring dogfight was tremendous. Lane recalled, 'The sweat was pouring down my face and my oxygen mask was wet and sticky about my nose and mouth. I felt quite exhausted after the effort and my right arm ached from throwing the stick around the cockpit.'

At the end of a fight with a particular enemy aircraft, a fighter pilot often found himself in an empty sky. Having concentrated on the enemy – whether as the hunter or the hunted – he was unaware of the changing overall situation. His individual fight had

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gone one way and the rest of the war had gone another. This is what happened to both Lane and Unwin, separately, a few minutes later.

Lane was able to reorient himself and, alone, returned to the battle. He attacked two formations of Do 17s, one head-on and one from astern. The Do 17 crews ‘did not appear to like head-on attacks as they jumped about a bit as I flashed through. I observed no results from these attacks.’ Attacking from astern, Lane opened fire at about 1000 yards, too long a range to have an effect. His ammunition expended, he headed back to his airfield.

His wingmen had also survived the German attack. Unable to follow his tight turn, they had let him conduct his dogfight by himself. Like Lane, they returned from the afternoon battle, with ‘Grumpy’ Unwin scoring two confirmed Bf 109s shot down. Filling out his combat report, in the blank thoughtfully labelled ‘number of enemy aircraft’, Lane entered: ‘Whole Luftwaffe’.

ⁱ AIR 50/30, Squadron Leader Brian Lane, Combat Report, 15 September 1940, National Archives (UK); Dilip Sarkar, *Spitfire Squadron at War* (Malden, Surrey: Air Research Publications, 1990), pp. 66–9, 152–4.

ⁱⁱ Unwin complained when he was left out of the first mission to Dunkirk. Bader, then Unwin’s flight commander, retorted ‘Shut up, grumpy.’ Until his death in 2006 at the age of ninety-three, he remained ‘Grumpy’ Unwin. ‘Wing Commander G A Unwin, DSO, DFM and Bar’, *The Daily Telegraph* (22 June 2006), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1522658/Wing-Commander-Grumpy-Unwin.html>