

Spitfire: The Legend, Part 2

THE RAF TAKES THE INITIATIVE

By Alex Valz

The Channel Front in 1941

After the Battle of Britain concluded around October 31, 1940, Fighter Command and the Jagdwaffe continued to lock horns through the end of 1940. By that time both the RAF's Air Chief Marshal Dowding and Air Vice Marshal Keith Parks, who had been the commander of No. 11 Group during the Battle of Britain, had been controversially replaced. Dowding's successor, Air Chief Marshal Sir W. Sholto Douglas, was persuaded by Viscount Trenchard, who had led the British air force in World War I, to take the offensive now that major German daylight raids were over. After some skepticism, Douglas (pictured below on the far left) came around to the idea that incursions across the Channel might meet with some success and would show the Germans that the RAF was capable of taking the fight to them.



Keith Parks' successor as No. 11 Fighter Group leader was Trafford Leigh-Mallory, who was anxious to implement his "Wing Concept" in support of the new offensive. The "wings" would be comprised of four squadrons from sector stations in 11 Group. Each wing would be led by an experienced pilot with known fighting ability and the presence of mind to control up to four squadrons in combat.

The code names of "Circus," "Ramrod," "Rhubarb," and "Ranger" were used to refer to the operations of the RAF's offensive. A "Rhubarb" was a sortie by a small section of fighters, usually pairs, to attack targets of opportunity such as trains or fixed targets. "Circus" referred to an attack by bombers escorted by fighters. The purpose of the bombers was to entice enemy fighters into combat. "Ramrod" was similar to a Circus except that the bombers had the primary task of destroying a target. A "Ranger" was a sweep by a large formation of fighters with the intention of destroying German fighters.

Now that the RAF had undertaken the initiative, it was their turn to endure all of the disadvantages the Luftwaffe experienced during the Battle of Britain. The RAF squadrons were required to operate at maximum range over hostile territory with part of the journey flown over water. With the roles reversed, it was now the Luftwaffe's turn to deal out the punishment.

The Opposing Aircraft

The RAF planes used during the offensive were the Spitfire IIA and the Spitfire VB. Because of production delays, the last of the Spitfire II's would not be replaced until the end of 1941. Similarly, the Germans would be equipped with the Messerschmitt Bf-109 E-7/8 during that period. They would not transition to the newer Bf-109F until 1942,

The Spitfire IIA was powered by a Rolls-Royce Merlin XII engine producing 1,135 hp, only slightly more powerful than the Spitfire I's engine. The Spitfire IIA could reach a speed of 354 mph at 17,550 feet. It was armed with eight .303 Browning machine guns. The Spitfire VB was powered by a 1,470 hp Merlin 45 and could reach a speed of 371 mph at 20,000 feet. The VB version packed a powerful battery of two 20 mm Hispano cannon and four .303 Brownings.

The German Bf-109F-2 was powered by a 1,270 hp Daimler-Benz 601N engine and could reach a speed of 371 mph at 20,000 feet, the same as the Spitfire VB. The German plane was armed with one 15 mm machine gun and two 7.92 mm machine guns. The more advanced Bf109F-4 was powered by a 1,350 hp DB 601E and could reach a speed of 379 mph at 20,000 feet. It carried a 20 mm cannon and two 7.92 mm machine guns.

As before, the Bf-109F could climb faster than its British counterpart because of the Messerschmitt's fuel injected engine. At high altitudes above 30,000 feet, the Bf-109F's performance was outstanding. It was also a superior aircraft below 10,000 feet. Therefore, the wisest course for the Spitfire VB was to stay within 10,000 to 30,000 feet when engaging the Bf-109F.

It was assumed that the Spitfire could outturn the German fighters as had been the case with the Spitfire I/II marks. However, some experienced Luftwaffe pilots felt confident enough to challenge the Spitfire in the horizontal plane.

Although near the Spitfire V in maneuverability, the BF-109F was at a significant disadvantage in firepower, particularly the F-2 version. Unlike the Spitfire I versus the Bf-109E, the Spitfire V had a more destructive punch than the Bf-109F. The Spitfire V's two 20 mm cannon and four .303 Browning machine guns had roughly twice as much power than one cannon and two machine guns. The weak firepower of the Bf-109's F model came under such criticism from front-line pilots that Messerschmitt made it a priority to upgrade the armament in future variants.

German Tactics Frustrate RAF Raids

During the first six months of 1941, as many as eight Jagdgeschwader (fighter groups) opposed the RAF's Channel Offensive. But following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June of that year, only JG 2 and JG 26 remained on the Channel Front. These two groups had at most 250 fighters on hand. At times only 150 serviceable fighters were available, but these aircraft were manned by highly skilled and motivated aviators who had seen more than a year of combat and were equipped with the definitive Bf-109F-4.

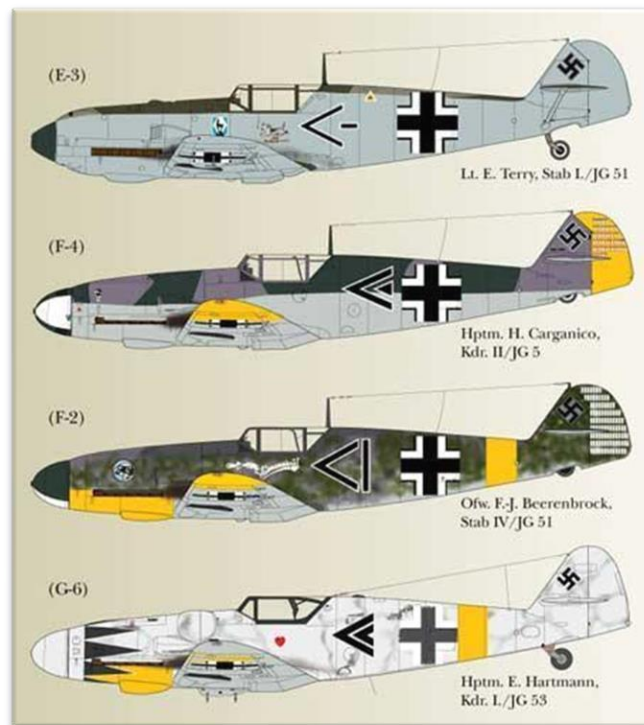
The RAF did not have a shortage of fighters. The Spitfire V was the most produced of all of the Spitfire marks, of which the Spitfire Mk VB variant was the most numerous with 3,911 fighters. Spitfire production increased during 1941 and steadily outpaced the Bf-109's output. So, by the summer of 1941, the Luftwaffe was greatly outnumbered over Western France.

The Luftwaffe had been quick to build up an air defense system to oppose the British raids. Early warning radar sets combined with the German Radio Listening Service gave fighters notice of impending attacks. An alarm start system similar to that used by the RAF the previous summer to scramble aircraft against approaching formations was also implemented.

The ability of JG 2 and JG 26 to penetrate escorts and attack the bombers in the Circus led to even larger escorting groups. Ultimately 20 squadrons of Spitfires, totaling some 240 fighters, were required to escort only a dozen Blenheim bombers. Because the deployment of these armadas required great skill, cloudless conditions were required over assembly points, Circus were only attempted in the spring and summer months when the weather was most favorable.

The German defenders did not attempt to confront such large formations. The plan was to get off the ground quickly, gain height, and make use of sun and clouds to attack any part of the Circus formation that appeared vulnerable.

General Theo Osterkamp, commander of Luftflotte 2, and his two fighter group commanders, Wilhelm Balthasar of JG 2 and Adolph Galland of JG 26, understood that their role was to inflict maximum damage to the RAF while preserving their own limited forces.



Galland (shown above) in particular, was considered a master tactician on the Channel Front in 1941. On an intercept mission, Galland would position his fighters carefully and wait patiently for moments of confusion in the large and unwieldy RAF formations. Since he was to the rear and had the sun at his back, he was virtually undetectable. When the time was perfect, he would lead a slashing attack through the

fighter screen as they closed on the bombers with guns blazing. The fighters would then continue down, taking advantage of the Bf-109's superior performance in a dive. Galland would, at times, split his force in two, leaving some fighters to linger above the escorts while he took a group of planes to attack from below.

There is no doubt that the Luftwaffe won the battle over occupied France in 1941. It has been shown time and again in history that a small cohesive force can defeat a much larger but unwieldy and less disciplined force by fighting smart and taking advantage of its strengths. That certainly had been the case the previous summer in the Battle of Britain.

The losses experienced by both sides back up this assertion. Though there was a tendency on both sides to inflate claims of victories, actual numbers back up the fact that the Germans had won. Between June and December 1941, 168 Luftwaffe fighters had been destroyed compared with 838 RAF fighters for a kill ratio of 5:1.

The Luftwaffe would continue to win in 1941 as more capable fighters such as the Focke-Wulf FW-190 and the high-altitude Messerschmitt Bf-109G-1 began to replace the Bf-109F. It wasn't until the latter part of 1942 that the most successful Spitfire of all, the Spitfire Mk IX would be deployed and would match or even exceed the FW-190 in performance.

British and German Aces in the Channel Front

There were a number of aces on both sides who stood out over Western France during 1941 and 1942. On the German side, the top scorer was Siegfried Schnell (JG 2) who claimed 40 victories. The top JG 26 scorer was Josef "Pips" Priller of "Longest Day" fame, who claimed 36 victories. Adolph Galland claimed 28 victories along with five other pilots who claimed 20 victories or more. As impressive as those totals are, these numbers are probably somewhat inflated, as German claims usually were. The British claims are much more modest with Wing Commander "Paddy" Finucane claiming 13 victories and Wing Commander Jamie Rankin claiming 12. No other RAF pilot claimed more than nine victories.

NEXT ARTICLE: In the January *Spare Parts*, Alex discusses the siege of Malta and the crucial role Spitfires and their pilots play in defending Britain's vital Mediterranean base. Among the RAF heroes is a very troublesome Spitfire pilot who becomes the "Falcon of Malta" and Canada's greatest flying ace.

