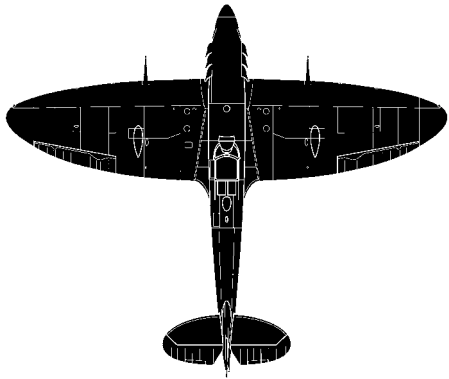


# Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

## Spitfire



The Spitfire, one of the all-time great fighters, was a study in superlatives. In World War II, Britain built more Spitfires than any other type of tactical warplane. It was the only fighter kept in production before, during, and after the war. The Spitfire served in all theaters—from Europe to South Asia, from the Far East to North Africa—and was, arguably, the best-looking fighter of the war, too. It was emblematic of the heroism of the Battle of Britain.

The Spitfire sprang from the brain of Reginald J. Mitchell, Supermarine's top designer, and was financed privately. Its thin elliptical wings gave it great speed as well as distinctiveness. The Royal Air Force had 2,160 Spitfires in hand or on order when war broke out in September 1939 and just kept building them. Originally an interceptor, the Spitfire soon took up close air support, convoy protection, and

reconnaissance missions. Over time, its Merlin engine was supplemented in some models by the Griffon. Its only shortcoming was its relatively short range, which made it unsuitable for escorting bombers on raids deep into Europe.

The Spitfire's elegant curves and graceful wing made it tricky to build, but pilots loved its great look, not to mention its speed, maneuverability, cockpit visibility, and firepower. The adaptable Spitfire operated in frigid weather or sandstorms, high winds or tropical heat. It played a key role not only in the 1940 Battle of Britain but also in defense of Malta and the British coasts. It was particularly important in the Allied landing at Salerno, where it offered virtually the only close air support available. The Spitfire is a truly legendary aircraft, a symbol to this day of the English determination against the Axis powers.

—Walter J. Boyne

**This aircraft:** RAF Spitfire Mk VB #BL584—DWX—as it looked in July 1942, when flown by Flt. Lt. Denis Crowley-Milling of No. 610 Squadron, based at RAF Ludham in Britain.



### In Brief

Supermarine design ★ built for RAF by Supermarine, Westland, Vickers Armstrong, Cunliffe-Owen ★ first flight March 1936 ★ crew of 1 ★ single V-12 engine ★ number built 22,579 ★ **Specific to Spitfire Mk VB:** max speed 378 mph ★ cruise speed 200 mph ★ max range 470 miles (loaded) ★ armament (typical) two 20 mm cannon and four .303-cal machine guns ★ weight (max) 6,700 lb ★ span 36 ft 10 in ★ length 29 ft 11 in ★ height 11 ft 5 in.

### Famous Fliers

RAF's top ace (38 victories), James E. "Johnnie" Johnson ★ Eric S. Lock, 16.5 victories in Battle of Britain ★ aces Douglas Bader, Brendan Finucane, Richard Hillary, Adolf Malan, George Beurling, Robert Stanford-Tuck, Al Deere, and Neville Duke ★ American-born RCAF pilot John Gillespie Magee, author of "High Flight" ★ US pilots David Schilling, Donald Blakeslee, William Dunn, Reade Tilley, Lance Wade, Francis Gabreski, and Chesley Peterson.

### Interesting Facts

First British aircraft to down a jet fighter (German Me-262 on Oct. 5, 1944) ★ first fighter to operate from Normandy after invasion ★ first operational fighter with pressurized cockpit ★ flown by RAF's Eagle Squadrons ★ one of few foreign airplanes used by USAAF ★ flew off carriers to defend Malta ★ served in armed forces of more than 20 nations ★ designer wanted to name it "Shrew."



**This Spitfire WXF was part of RAF's No. 302 Squadron, a Polish-crewed fighter outfit formed as a result of a 1940 agreement between London and the Polish government-in-exile.**