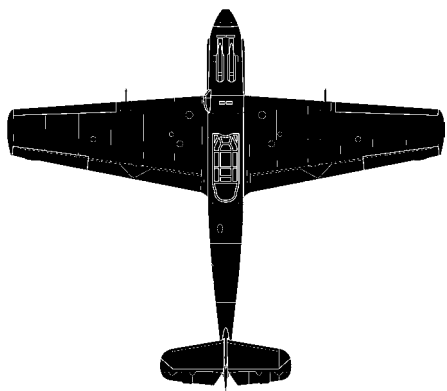


Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

Bf 109



In the story of World War II air combat over Europe, a prominent place must be given to Messerschmitt's Bf 109, the German Luftwaffe's best fighter. The Bf 109 became famous early for its duels with RAF Spitfires in the Battle of Britain. Later, it pressed relentless attacks against US and British bombers attacking German cities.

The Bf 109 was sinister-looking and tricky to handle. When it first flew in 1935, it instantly became the world's most advanced fighter and was still a workhorse a decade later. The 109 blended superior climb, dive, and handling traits with astonishing speed, and was beloved by pilots, despite its limited visibility and shaky, narrow-track landing gear. Even when the later FW 190 entered the force, some German aces insisted on

sticking with the Bf 109. The 109 had a tiny but sophisticated airframe, with automatic leading edge slots, trailing edge slotted flaps, and slotted ailerons that helped low-speed characteristics. The all-metal Bf 109 featured a single spar wing and slender fuselage. However, it had short legs; in the desperate fighting over Britain, the Bf 109's fighting time was limited to about 20 minutes, and thus it lacked the staying power needed to win its most important fight.

The Bf 109 was versatile, flying missions of air superiority, escort, intercept, ground attack, and reconnaissance. However, it will be best remembered as the aircraft that scored more kills than any other in World War II—the fighter that always showed up for the fight.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: Bf 109E-4/N—#5819—as it looked in December 1940, when flown by then-Lt. Col. Adolf Galland. Note 58 victory bars (Galland ended with 104), Mickey Mouse emblem, chevron and bars of a wing commander, S on JG.26 shield, and yellow nose and rudder from the Battle of Britain. Note also the protruding telescope for long-range IFF and yellow symbol for high-octane C3 fuel.



A German Bf 109 in flight in 1942.

In Brief

Designed by Messerschmitt ★ built by Messerschmitt, others ★ first flight May 28, 1935 ★ crew of 1 ★ number built 33,675 (German production only) ★ **Specific to Bf 109G:** one Daimler-Benz DB 605A-1 engine ★ armament (typical) one 20 mm nose cannon, two 7.9 mm machine guns in cowlings ★ max speed 406 mph ★ cruise speed 365 mph ★ max range 324 mi ★ weight (loaded) 7,055 lbs ★ span 32 ft 6 in ★ length 29 ft 7 in ★ height 8 ft 2 in.

Famous Fliers

Top three German aces: Erich Hartmann (352 kills), Gerhard Barkhorn (301), Gunther Rall (275). **Notable:** Adolf Galland, fighter chief 1942-45. **Aces with 150+ kills:** Heinrich Ehrler, Hermann Graf, Gordon Gollob, Anton Hafner, Walter Krupinski, Helmut Lipfert, Hans-Joachim Marseille, Walter Nowotny, Johannes Steinhoff.

Interesting Facts

Production highest of any Western combat aircraft ★ “Bf” prefix from *Bayerische Flugzeugwerke A.G.*, forerunner of Messerschmitt ★ first model used Rolls Royce engine ★ Israeli Bf 109s fought Egyptian Spitfires in 1948 war ★ 10 main variants ★ Spanish Bf 109s used in 1969 film “Battle of Britain” ★ first displayed at 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin ★ five percent destroyed in landing accidents.