

## Interview with David Isby

### What is a “dual biography” of two aircraft?

This book offers a vivid and exciting first-ever “dual biography” of the British Supermarine Spitfire and German Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter aircraft of the Second World War. As a “dual biography”, the book’s main characters are the aircraft themselves, Before the Spitfire and Bf 109 were legends, before they were airplanes, and before those airplanes could develop their own personalities and become as much characters in their own story as any machine can become, they were the visions of single individuals that were eventually pushed and pulled, from designs on drawing boards, into reality. The transition from personal idea to airplane was made by relatively small teams of people, operating at what was then the limit of technology.

### Who did you write the book for?

It’s a subject I have been fascinated with all my life. While there have been no shortage of books about either aircraft or memoirs by those that flew them during the war, even the most devoted enthusiast will learn something new. But I wrote the book to have an appeal beyond a core of those interested to military history or aircraft. I aimed to give it a wider appeal, to a much broader audience, to those that will go to air displays to see historic aircraft in flight, or those looking at their own family connections to the events and aircraft of the Second World War. Other people have an interest in historic aircraft through flight simulations or building model airplanes. How many millions of plastic Spitfires and 109s have been built worldwide? I’ve accounted for a great many just by myself. So I present a book that is aimed at both the enthusiast and those with a more general interest. These airplanes touched a lot of lives, both directly and through their legends, and this book takes them from before they were ideas to their present iconic status.

### If the two aircraft, were the book’s main characters, what about the people that made up the story?

The characters that make up the story of the Spitfire and the Bf 109 start at their beginnings, with the designers, R. J. Mitchell and Willy Messerschmitt. There are air marshals and generals. Of course, it is also the fighter pilots’ story. The book includes in-depth looks at air combat from the cockpit of a Spitfire or Bf 109. This includes Flight Lieutenant Douglas Bader encountering 109s for the first time over Dunkirk.

The charismatic, cigar-smoking ace *Oberstleutnant* Adolf Galland, fighting Spitfires in his Bf 109 over northern France in 1941, was shot down three times on three consecutive combat missions. You get to watch as pilots’ from all over the world have a shot at Galland. Whitney Straight, a multi-millionaire from New York, blazes

off a seven-second burst and missies, so it's a Polish veteran of the Battle of Britain that gets him the first time, because Galland has slowed down to go after his friend. The second time he goes down, its Reg Grant from New Zealand that gets him. The third time, it was by another Pole, Squadron Leader Marian Pisarek, commanding officer of 308 Squadron and a five-victory ace. Galland survived having Pisarek shoot him down through a dramatic piece of good luck.

The book also includes the stories of people whose lives were affected by these fighters. It is the story not only of designers and fighter pilots, but also of teenage typists and their middle-aged fathers. It is also the story of other teenage girls, like Elli Friedmann, sent for slave labour at Messerschmitt's Augsburg factory, or the nameless workers that risked their lives to disrupt German war production.

### **Who is the intended audience for your book?**

*The Decisive Duel: Spitfire vs. 109* is a story likely to have broad appeal. Readers interested in Second World War or aviation history may at first think, since they likely have on their bookshelves many of the existing works on both aircraft, that one more may not be required, and that they'd rather have had a book on some aircraft whose story has not been so well told (maybe next time for the Lockheed Ventura). But I will say to them: I've read all these books too, and I bet you will learn something new from my one, or find some new insight or understanding.

The book should also be of interest to others. I've built model aircraft all my life. While there are no shortage of books with camouflage and markings, I hope to provide them with some of the stories and people behind the airplanes. For those interested in flight simulations and wargames, I offer explanations of the tactics and technology that are behind the mechanics. I try to explain what the full throttle height and corner velocity (the later a post-war term) of both the Spitfire and 109 were, why they were important, and how they shaped their battles.

Family history has become mainstream in recent years, not just the subject of genealogists and biographers. For those that had family members in the war in the air in the Second World War, this may give a sense of what was involved.