

SPITFIRE IX: SHRIKE KILLER?

Was the Spitfire Mk IX the answer to the Focke-Wulf Fw 190?

When the formidable Focke-Wulf Fw 190 first appeared in the skies over the English Channel 85 years ago, the RAF's Spitfire Mk Vs struggled to lay a glove on the Luftwaffe's newest fighter. An updated, re-engined Spitfire — the Mk IX — was hastily developed to sweep the skies of the dreaded "Butcher Bird". Did it? **ANDY SAUNDERS** investigates

WRITING TO THE British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, on September 8, 1942, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding made a startling declaration. Although retired from the service, Dowding still retained the ear of Churchill, and in his letter he bluntly set out views that must have landed equally uncomfortably with the Cabinet, Air Ministry and those charged with fighter procurement:

"The Spitfire has been moribund as a home-defence fighter for two years, and it died when the [Focke-Wulf] Fw 190 made an appearance."

Characteristically forthright, Dowding was correct in his damning verdict on the Spitfire. Nevertheless, his pronouncement was delivered some two months *after* the Spitfire Mk IX, intended to counter the Fw 190 better, had first gone into operational service. It thus raises the question: was the Spitfire IX anything like the panacea for the Fw 190 it was intended to be?

Entering obsolescence

First, to understand Dowding's stance, it is necessary to backtrack to 1940, when he said the Spitfire first became "moribund", and to examine why he thought this was the case. Dowding held the view that the RAF's home-defence fighters had not kept pace with German advances in technology and aircraft design. In this assertion

he was quite right. It was a situation that endured, to some degree, until the end of the war. During the Battle of Britain, for instance, it is often contended that the Spitfire and the Luftwaffe's Messerschmitt Bf 109E were relatively evenly matched. That, however, is not a position that the commander of any air force would wish to aspire to. Indeed, the object of the exercise is to have a fighter aircraft that is superior to that of one's enemy — not something that can simply match it.

By late October 1940 the new Bf 109F variant was starting to appear operationally over Britain and had already begun to demonstrate superiority in combat over the Spitfire Mk IIa. Dowding could clearly see how Fighter Command's one-time theoretical ascendancy had slipped to parity, and then further downwards into inferiority. What was needed, he argued, was a new fighter type, not a mere tinkering with improvements to the existing Spitfire marque. For now, however, it was all there was. The best had to be made of a bad job. It was not just Dowding, however, who was banging the drum as to the inadequacies of the Spitfire.

The same concerns had been voiced by Dowding's successor, Air Marshal William Sholto Douglas, who had already written to the Under-Secretary of State for Air on July 17, 1942, just as the Spitfire IX came into service, stating, *inter alia*, that "I have only 14 Spitfire IXs, whereas the



OPPOSITE PAGE Spitfire Mk IX LZ989 of No 316 (Warszawski) Sqn dispatches an Fw 190A during a bomber-escort sortie over Amiens on August 19, 1943, in this magnificent painting by renowned aviation artist MARK POSTLETHWAITE GAvA © 2026. The Spitfire was the victor this time — but how often were the tables turned?