

Aircraft of the Battle of Britain

During the Battle of Britain, the German air force (Luftwaffe) used small fighter planes to escort and protect their larger bombers. The most efficient fighter plane that they used was the Messerschmitt Bf 109.

The British Royal Air Force (RAF) had its own fighter planes, which it used to attack the German planes. The most famous British fighter plane, which took part in the Battle of Britain, was the Spitfire.

Complete the following activity in pairs:

- The two cards on the next page contain details about the Messerschmitt Bf 109 and the Spitfire. Take one card each.
- Take it in turns to pick a category and read out that information for your plane. Compare the data. For example, whose plane is fastest, lightest, or has the longest flight range?
- Discuss whether each feature would have been an advantage or disadvantage during the Battle of Britain and why.
- Once you have compared all the features, decide whether one of the planes would have been better than the other or whether they were evenly matched.
- Turn to the final page to see if you were correct.



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Spitfire (Mark I)



Air force:	British Royal Air Force (RAF)
Crew:	1
Engine:	1030 horsepower
Fuel injection:	no (the engine would cut out in a vertical dive)
Length:	9.1 m
Wingspan:	11.2 m
Weight:	2651 kg
Wing shape:	elliptical
Max. speed:	580 km/h
Max. altitude:	9300 m
Flight range:	668 km
Weapons:	machine guns

Messerschmitt Bf 109



Air force:	German air force (Luftwaffe)
Crew:	1
Engine:	1175 horsepower
Fuel injection:	yes (the engine continued to work during extreme manoeuvres)
Length:	8.9 m
Wingspan:	9.9 m
Weight:	2060 kg
Wing shape:	trapezoid
Max. speed:	550 km/h
Max. altitude:	11,000 m
Flight range:	660 km
Weapons:	machine guns and cannons

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Comparing the planes

The Messerschmitt Bf 109 and Spitfire were actually very evenly matched.

Both had advantages and disadvantages. For example, the Bf 109 was better than the Spitfire when flying at an altitude below 4600m, and the Spitfire was better than the Bf 109 above that height.

The spitfire could turn faster, but the Bf 109 could go straight into a dive (the Spitfire had to roll first, which wasted valuable time).

The outcome of a battle was normally decided by how much experience the pilot had, tactics and the number of planes involved.

In the Battle of Britain, 1023 Spitfires were lost and 1887 Bf 109s were lost.

The clever designs of both planes allowed them to be upgraded with new engines, equipment and weapons as they became available. This meant that as the Second World War progressed, both the Spitfire and the Bf 109 evolved, becoming faster, more powerful and more heavily armed.

