

Today, high school history classes in the United States barely, if at all, mention the Spanish Civil War. Yet, it was an event that paved the way for the Second World War while also giving stature to three of the world's worst tyrants — Stalin, Hitler, and Franco. The scope of that war is beyond this article but suffice to say that airpower played a prominent, if not decisive, role in the conflict.

When the war ended in favor of the Fascist Franco, his Nationalist Air Force comprised some 95 different types of aircraft — including 13 different types of German, Russian, and Italian fighters and all of them veterans of combat.

Franco, never one to miss an opportunity, knew that with the start of WWII, supplies from his friendly fellow Fascists would begin to dwindle as each nation paid more attention to their own needs. Accordingly, during 1940, Franco had his high-ranking air force officers begin a detailed inventory of what was in and what was available to the *Ejército del Aire* in the form of extra engines and spares. It was soon evident that much of the front-line equip-



Black Crosses Over the Channel

TO DAY, THE HISPANO PRODUCTION IS BEING APPRECIATED AS THE FIGHTER IT ORIGINALLY WAS. HOWEVER, THAT WAS NOT ALWAYS TRUE

BY RICHARD PAVER

ment was, or would soon be, obsolete. Therefore, Franco and his officers knew it would be of utmost importance to keep getting aircraft and engines until an indigenous aircraft industry could be developed to supply the *Ejército del Aire* with European-quality fighters and bombers.

Early variants of the Messerschmitt Bf 109 had performed admirably in Spain and the *Luftwaffe* developed fighter and bomber tactics that would soon be put to use in Europe. During 1940, an application was placed to Hitler's government so that Spain could build the Bf 109 under license. Franco

also knew the wisdom of not relying on one specific source so he had his *Ministerio del Aire* (Air Ministry) also apply to France for a license to build the Dewoitine D.250 fighter — considered to be the best of all French fighting machines and it would be designated HS.50 in Spanish service.

France was also known for building advanced V-12 engines and included in a variety of motors was the Hispano-Suiza 12Z Type 87 V-12 “cannon engine” that was liquid-cooled, supercharged, inverted, and could develop 1280-hp. This powerful and modern motor was intended for a new series of

Dewoitine fighters that were not developed and the test program for the engine was completed only days before the French surrendered during November 1940.

Franco ran a very efficient, and very brutal, intelligence force and they discovered that the prototype motor was hidden in southern France. Mark Birkigt of Hispano-Suiza had ordered an employee to hide the -12 so it would not be discovered the the Germans. Through a world-class espionage act, the engine was spirited into Spain without either the French or the Germans knowing that it had gone missing!

The Spanish had an extra ace on their side — the “stolen” engine could be built in Spain's Hispano-Suiza plants in Barcelona and Seville without paying those expensive foreign licenses! With the French surrender, numerous talented French aeronautical engineers, designers, and workers escaped

High above a typical British cloudscape, the two Hispanos enjoy a bit of fun flying.

into Spain — and some of these had actual experience with building the new engine. Thus, beginning in 1941, many Hispano-Suiza personnel, including Birkigt, were now working in sunny Spain on the development of the

12Z 87 for the *Ejército del Aire*.

During 1941, licensing troubles arose with Dewoitine and these led Franco to cancel further development of the HS.50 project. Because of this, Franco decided to strengthen his already established ties with Messerschmitt. Thus, a definitive contract was signed with the Germans to build 200 Bf 109G fighters that would then be fitted with the H-S 12Z 87 cannon engine.

The Spaniards and Germans came up with a supply contract that, beginning in

early 1943, would require the Germans to supply:

- One complete fuselage and blue print drawings to be utilized as a pre-production prototype.
- Twenty-five disassembled Bf 109G airframes minus engines would arrive by November 1943.
- Enough spares for the completion of 70 more fighters in separate sub-groups by August 1944.

The remaining 105 fighters were to be built entirely in Spain, but, in some cases, would utilize pre-fabricated components of German origin. The contract also called for the supply of some important tooling but the German RLM was opposed to this so Spain was basically required to set up the production line on their own

During June 1943, Spanish workers uncrate the fuselage of Bf 109G-4/Trop WNr. 19221 and this was to become the prototype of what initially would be the locally produced Bf 109J. However, the war was not going the way the Germans forecast a year earlier and the 25 Bf 109G-6s did not arrive in October —but only five of these machines were complete! Also, the remaining partially complete 20 aircraft were lacking many vital bits of interior equipment. The Spanish government filed numerous protests but the Germans had more to worry about — a lot more.

The Spaniards never did receive the contracted supply of aircraft (which they had actually pre-paid) and all time tables were thrown to the wind.

Casting about for solutions, in 1944 (the Spanish were really working on siesta time) a decision was made to mate the smug-

gled engine with one of the early Bf 109E airframes. Time kept drifting and in 1946 a somewhat similar adaptation was done to the Bf 109J prototype (this was the single fuselage delivered three-years earlier) which had an H-S12Z-87 engine fitted with a Swiss Escher-Wyss V71L three-blade propeller and firing a Hispano 204 cannon through the prop hub. This conglomeration became airborne on 8 February 1946. It was then extensively tested and found to be acceptable — not a good term for what was going to be the country's main front-line fighter. This led to a new contract that was signed in July by the Spanish Air Ministry and *La Hispano Aviacion* for 200 of the new aircraft. The new aircraft was redesignated from Bf 109J to HA.1109-J1L and this took place because the Allied Powers had suspended all patents and licenses previously issued by Germany's aeronautical industries.

For the Spanish, things got worse. In late 1946, the new United Nations condemned Franco and his government — call them fascists. The US member nations recalled their ambassadors. The ensuing political and economic isolation caused great hardships for the average Spaniard. Accordingly, Spain's once semi-robust aviation industry slid to a near-stop. During 1947, the 25 German fuselages were utilized for experimental use while two

