

Portugal's Aeronáutica Militar, 1937 - 1947

Portugal experienced the same difficulties as most other European nations during the late 1930s in trying to obtain effective combat aircraft. It was not until 1937 that the Portugese awoke to the need to upgrade their air capability, and that year military aviation in Portugal was substantially reorganized and an urgent program was begun to upgrade the capabilities of Portugal's Aeronáutica Militar. In 1938 the first new equipment arrived: ten Ju-52g3e, used as nocturnal bombers, and another ten Ju-86K-6 for use as day bombers. A similar number of Breda Ba.65bis were ordered to equip an attack squadron, and fifteen Gladiator Mk.IIs were acquired for a fighter squadron. An order was also placed for a dozen Spitfire Mk.IAs, although the start of the Second World War led the British to halt exports of this aircraft. Instead, another fifteen Gladiators were diverted from RAF deliveries and sent on in place of the Spitfires. This was the first-line strength of the Aeronáutica Militar when the Second World War began.

The Aeronáutica Militar operated from only two bases, at Sintra and at Tancos, with a third under construction at Ota. Squadrons were known by their base, so that one Gladiator squadron was Grupo de Caça Nr 1, at Base Aérea Nr 1 (Sintra), and the other Grupo de Caça Nr 3 at Base Aérea Nr 3 (Tancos). Ota, which was to be the main airbase for the Portugese, was Base Aérea Nr 2, or BA 2. In 1943 code letters were introduced for each squadron, thereafter fighter units were known as Esquadriha OK or Esquadriha VX, after the squadron designator. The only exception to this were the Gladiators, based at Lajes (BA 4) in the Azores when this system was introduced, which did not wear squadron codes.

The collapse of France caused considerable concern in Portugal, where it was feared that an invasion of the Iberian peninsula would follow. The Portugese were well aware of the strategic importance of several of their colonial possessions, notably the Azores and Cape Verde islands, especially so given the escalation in submarine warfare. The Azores, in particular, were ideally placed to either replenish or interdict German U-boats, depending on who held them, and were totally devoid of air defenses. In June 1941 Portugal sent all the Gladiators there together with half of the Ju-52s, leaving continental Portugal completely without fighters. In February that year a freak cyclone had struck Base Aerea Nr. 1 at Sintra, destroying the hangar containing all the Breda Ba.65s, and the Portugese were now desperate for aircraft.

Although the right-wing regime of Dr. Oliveira Salazar was more inclined to support the Fascist and Falangist movements than the Allied cause, there was a mutual defense treaty still in effect which bound Portugese and British interests in the event of war, and at this time the Portugese chose to invoke the 1373 Anglo-Portugese Treaty of Military Alliance. They offered to trade bases and landing rights on the Azores in return for immediate material aid in the form of new aircraft, and although they had very little to offer in the way of reinforcement, the British accepted the offer with alacrity. Work was begun on two airbases in the Azores, one for Coastal Command at Lajes and another for the Royal Navy at Faial. In return, the British promised to provide sufficient aircraft for eight 18 aircraft fighter squadrons, together with some Airspeed Oxfords, Miles Master, Magister, and Marinet training aircraft, and spares.

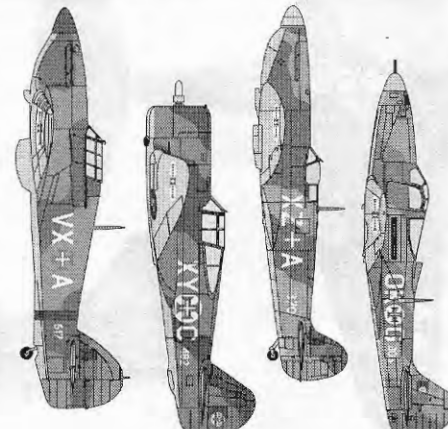
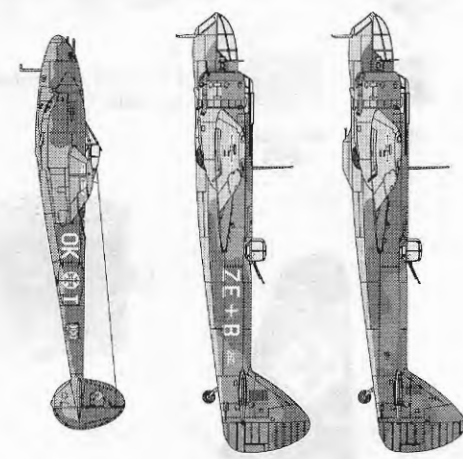
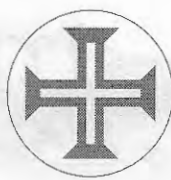
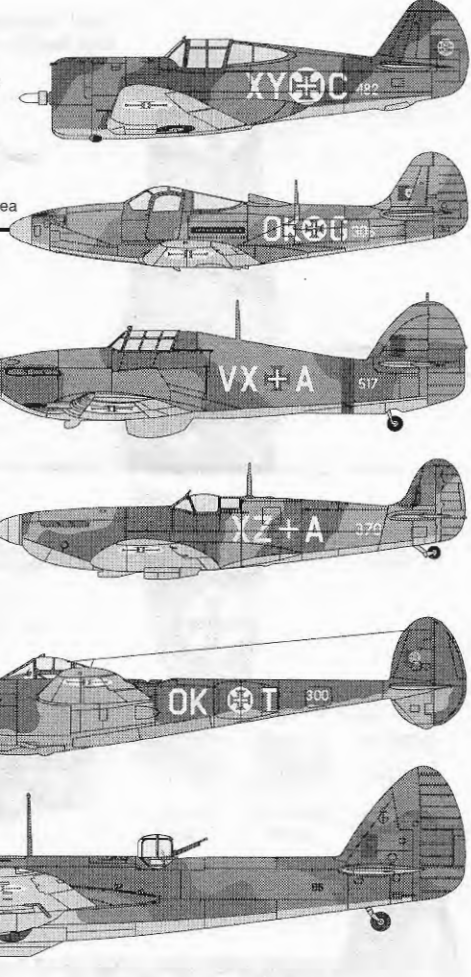
In October 1941 the first aircraft arrived, eleven Mohawk IVs, intended for France but which Britain had taken over in 1940. It would be some time before the next aircraft were received from Britain, who in 1941 were still hard pressed to meet their own needs, but more reinforcements came from an unexpected source. In November 1941 U.S. troops had landed in French North Africa, and aircraft headed there from the U.K. had to fly around Portugal. In the event of mechanical problems, navigational errors, or fuel shortages, Portugal was the destination of choice since Spain was considered much more hostile to Allied aircrew, and many Allied aircraft landed and were interned during the war. In November 1941, a pair of P-38Fs of the U.S. 1st Fighter Group lost their way en route to North Africa and landed at Lisbon in error. One pilot had gotten out of his aircraft when the Portugese pulled up, but the second, whose engines were still ticking over, realized their mistake in time, fired up his engines, and made good his escape. The remaining pilot was arrested and his airplane impounded, and although he was soon repatriated, his P-38 was later put into service with Esquadriha OK at Ota. A month later a similar incident took place, this time involving eighteen P-39D-1s destined for the 81st FG in Tunisia. The pilots were sent home minus their aircraft, which were used to form Esquadriha OK at Ota in 1943.

At the end of 1942 the first British fighters arrived, eighteen Spitfire Mk.IAs for the new Esquadriha XZ at Tancos, as well as eight Lysander Mk.IIIAs, which replaced a few ancient Potez XXVs with the Army co-operation squadron. The tempo picked up in 1943: fifteen Hurricane Mk.IIB and IIC were received in August to equip Esquadriha VX at Ota, and by the end of the year fifty more Hurricanes and fifty Spitfire Mk.VBs had been received. The Hurricanes were used to form Esquadriha SU (Mk.IIC) and Esquadriha TY (Mk.IIB) at Tancos, and the Spitfires equipped Esquadriha RL and Esquadriha MR at Ota. By early 1944, Ota was the home for three squadrons of Hurricanes, two of Spitfires, one each of P-39s and Mohawks, a mixed squadron of Spitfires and Blenheims, two five-aircraft squadrons of Ju-86s and one of Ju-52s. To aid in identification, squadron colours were introduced on spinners and around the fuselage. In July 1944, the Spitfire squadrons were moved to Ota and the Hurricanes concentrated at Tancos, apart from two independent commands at Oporto and Lisbon. As more Hurricanes arrived, further squadrons were formed: Esquadriha RV (Mk.IIB) at Espinho, Esquadriha GL at Tancos (Mk.IIC), joined finally in 1946 by Esquadriha MP at Sintra. In total, Britain supplied 116 Hurricanes and 33 Spitfires in return for the Azores bases.

With the end of the war, the Mohawks and Airacobras were scrapped. In 1947 another sixty Spitfire Mk.VBs were ordered, mostly clipped-wing versions, and these were used to make up attritional losses and to re-form Esquadriha ZE, disbanded in 1945 when the Blenheims were replaced. The Hurricanes and Gladiators served until 1952, when the last were scrapped, and the following year the Spitfires were finally retired.

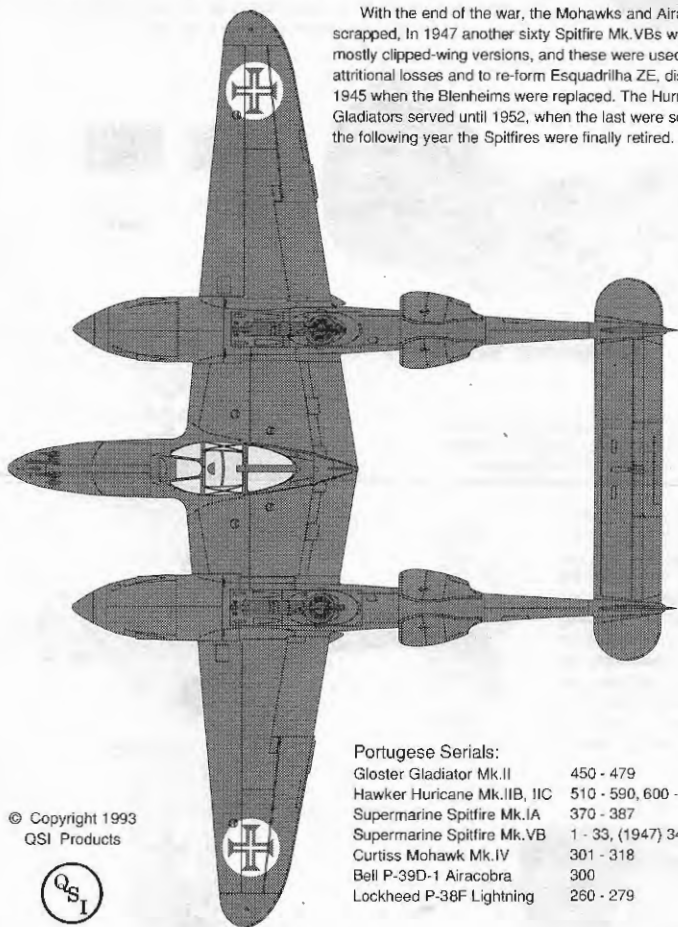
Portugese Serials:	
Gloster Gladiator Mk.II	450 - 479
Hawker Hurricane Mk.IIB, IIC	510 - 590, 600 - 649
Supermarine Spitfire Mk.IA	370 - 387
Supermarine Spitfire Mk.VB	1 - 33, (1947) 34 - 92
Curtiss Mohawk Mk.IV	301 - 318
Bell P-39D-1 Airacobra	300
Lockheed P-38F Lightning	260 - 279

Aircraft Markings for the Modelling World



7134 - Portugal: Spitfire Mk.I, Hurricane Mk.IIC, P-39D Airacobra, Hawk 75A-4, Blenheim Mk.IVf, P-38F Lightning

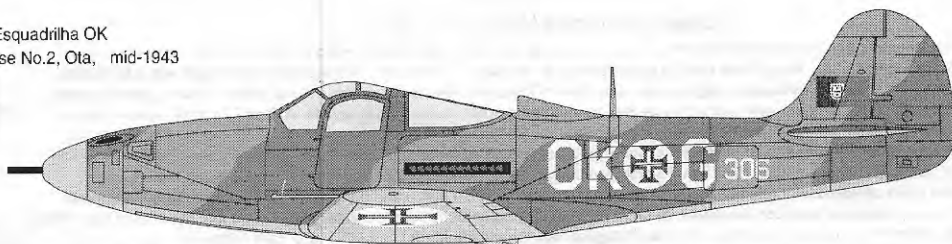
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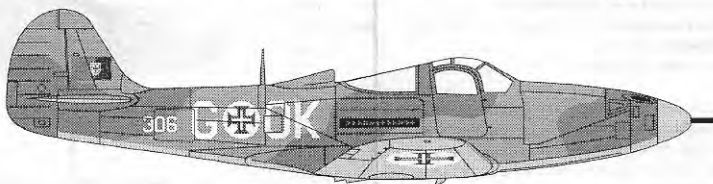
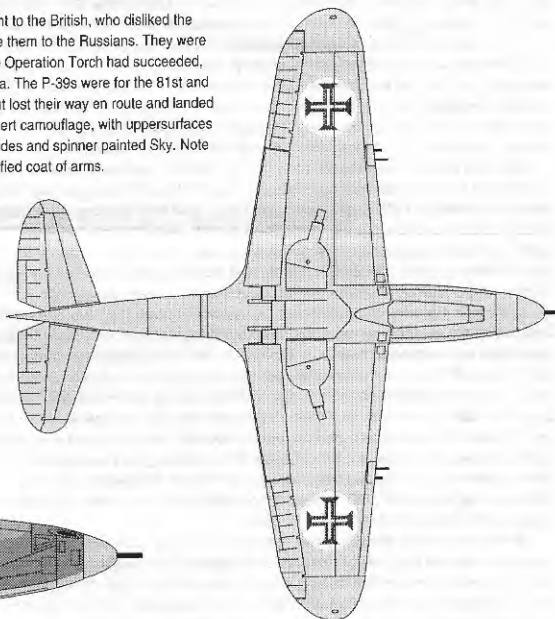
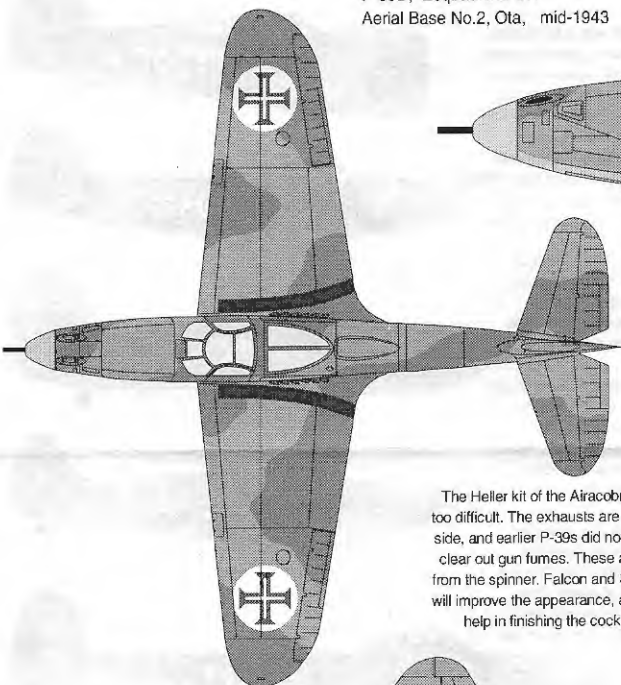


P-39D, Esquadriha OK
Aerial Base No.2, Ota, mid-1943

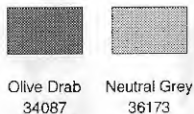


Portugal's Airacobras had originally been sent to the British, who disliked the airplane intensely and quickly offered to donate them to the Russians. They were placed in storage pending shipment, and once Operation Torch had succeeded, returned to the Americans for use in North Africa. The P-39s were for the 81st and 350th Fighter Groups of the Twelfth Air Force but lost their way en route and landed in Portugal. They were painted in RAF-style desert camouflage, with uppersurfaces in Dark Earth and Middlestone, and the undersides and spinner painted Sky. Note the flag on the fin had a simplified coat of arms.

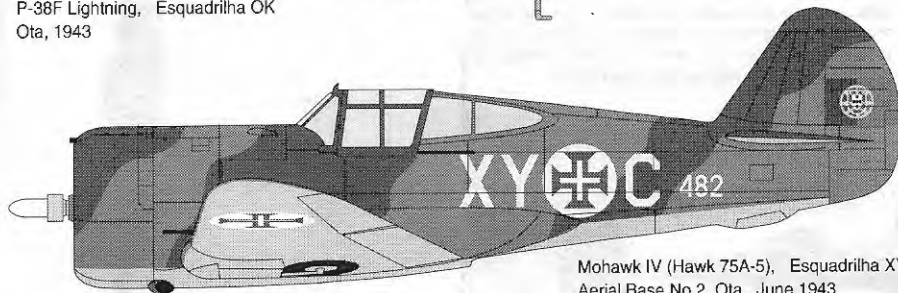
The Heller kit of the Airacobra is quite nice, and building a P-39D is not too difficult. The exhausts are of the earlier type with twelve stubs on each side, and earlier P-39s did not have the scoops on the nose introduced to clear out gun fumes. These aircraft also had the long cannon protruding from the spinner. Falcon and Squadron have canopies for the P-39, which will improve the appearance, and Eduard has a photo-etch detailing fret to help in finishing the cockpit and finer points around the airframe.



Portugal's P-38 was finished in standard U.S. colours of Olive Drab on the uppersurfaces with Neutral Grey undersides. The (sole) photo shows that there was a name painted on the port nose, but no details are available. There is also a lingering suspicion that the aircraft had two-colour camouflage on the uppersurfaces, but no evidence shows this used in the 12th AF, so Olive Drab prevails. If anyone can shed further light on this aircraft, please contact us.



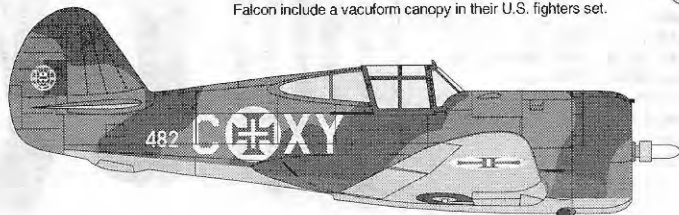
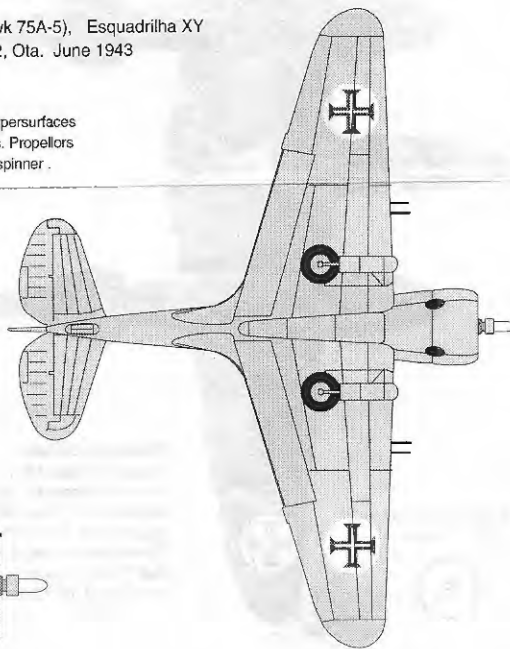
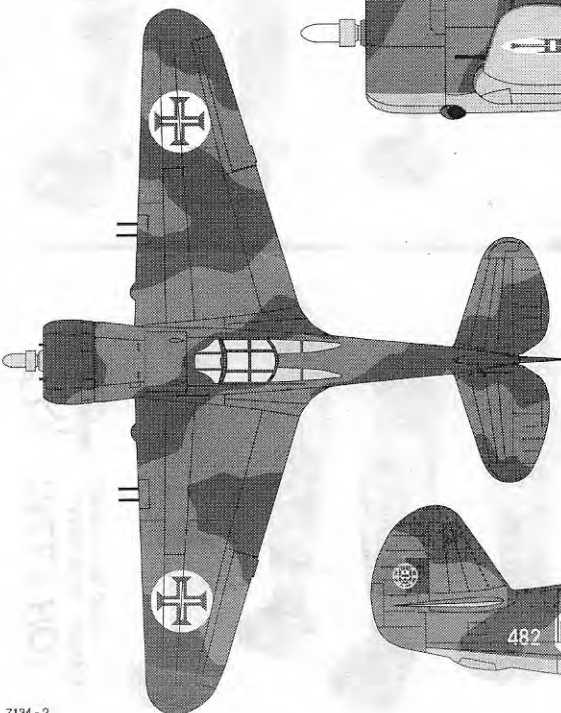
P-38F Lightning, Esquadriha OK
Ota, 1943

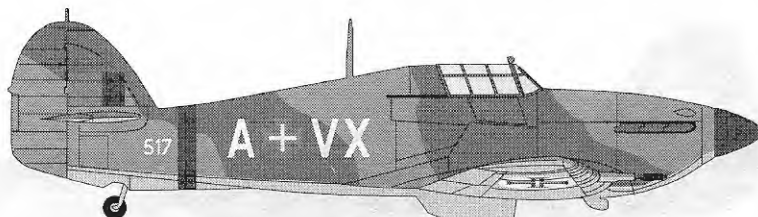
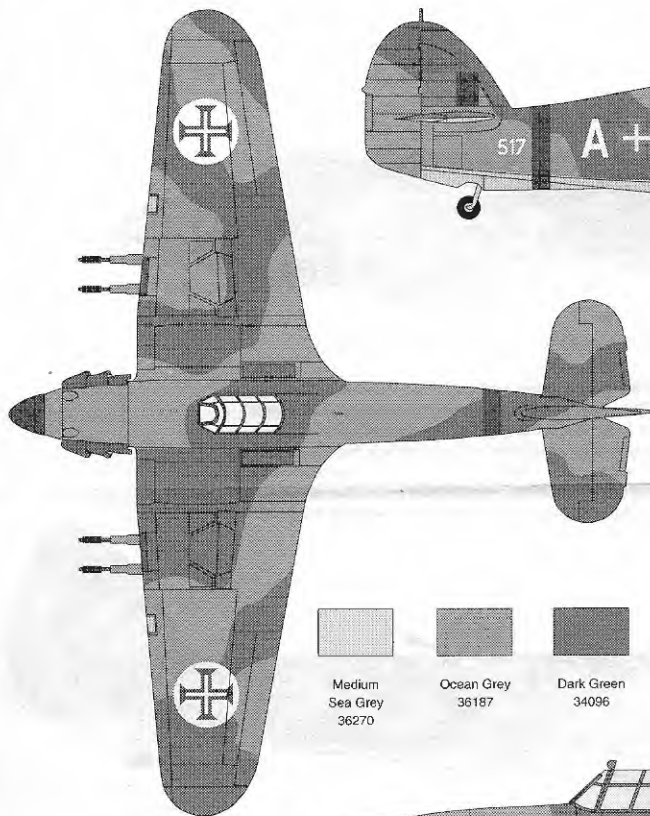


Mohawk IV (Hawk 75A-5), Esquadriha XY
Aerial Base No.2, Ota, June 1943

The Mohawks were delivered in standard 1941 RAF colours. Uppersurfaces were Dark Earth and Dark Green, with Sky Type 'S' undersides. Propellers were black with yellow tips and natural metal hub and white spinner.

The Monogram kit of the P-36C is the best kit to work from to build a Mohawk. Available again from Revell, albeit at FIFTEEN times the original price, it is one of those very nice kits Monogram offered at the end of the 1960s. The main difference between the P-36C and the Mohawk is the Wright Cyclone of the latter, and fortunately there is an exquisite casting from D.B. Conversions available which makes what would be a major rebuild quite simple. The P-36 and the P-40B are very similar in many areas, and many of the detailing accessories for the later aircraft can be used on the Mohawk without qualms. To finish it off, Falcon include a vacuform canopy in their U.S. fighters set.

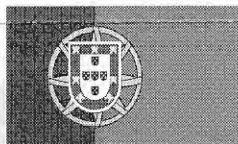
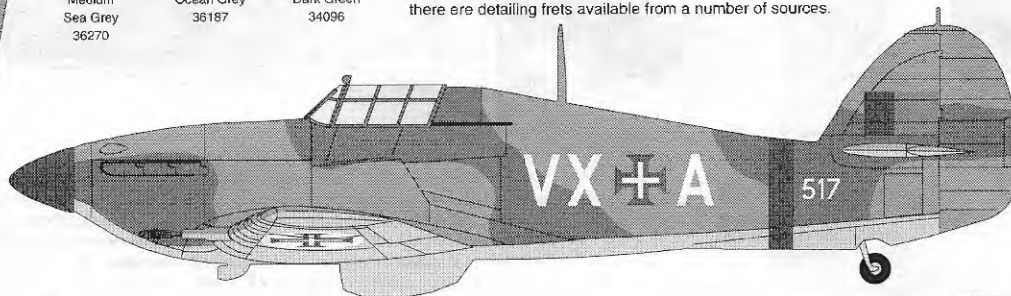




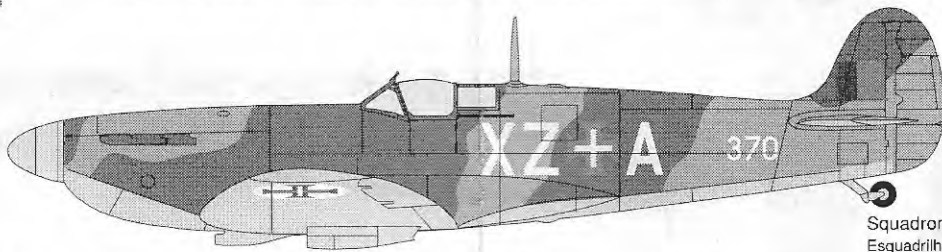
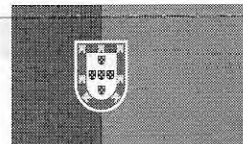
Hurricane Mk.IIc, Esquadriha VX
Ota, September 1943

The Hurricanes and Spitfires which the Portugese received in 1943 were camouflaged in the contemporary RAF scheme, with uppersurfaces in Ocean Grey with Dark Green camouflage, and undersides in Medium Sea Grey. With as many similar aircraft operating from relatively few bases, the Portugese decided to adopt distinctive colours for each squadron. The Hurricanes of Esquadriha VX had green spinners, and a green band was painted around the rear fuselage.

To model a Portugese Hurricane Mk.IIc, the preferred kit is Airfix #2067. There are at least two other 1/72 Airfix Hurricanes which are to be avoided, #2096 which is a rebox of Heller kit #269, and #2042 which is the original Airfix Hurricane, now truly a fossil. The first kit is generally accurate, and can be build pretty much straight from the box. The wing cannon can be scrounged from the old Frog kit or from the Heller kit. A canopy is available from Squadron or Falcon, and there are detailing frets available from a number of sources.



Three variations of insignia appeared on the tail of Portugese aircraft. The Mohawks carried the national flag across the rudder with the national crest in the center. The Airacobras had a simplified crest on the flag, which was now seen on the vertical stabilizer in what became the standard position. The national crest lacked the usual 'basketweave', and was a common variation on some types. The final form of flag insignia was a simple flash, in the national colours of green (leading) and red. Examples of the national flag are seen at left, and the simpler variation is at right.



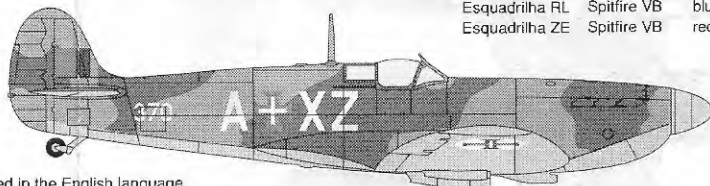
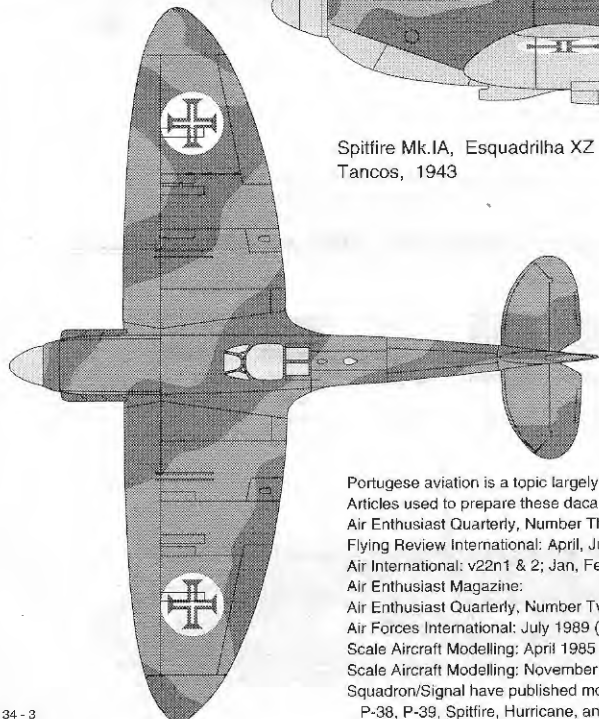
Spitfire Mk.IA, Esquadriha XZ
Tancos, 1943

The Spitfires were painted in the standard RAF day fighter scheme, with uppersurfaces in Ocean Grey and Dark Green and with Medium Sea Grey undersides. The spinner was Sky.

The best Spitfire kit to use is the Airfix kit #1071, a simple but quite adequate kit which captures the lines of the aircraft well. There is an excellent resin interior available from Cooper Details which will make building a show-stopper a good deal easier, and vacuform canopies can be obtained from Squadron or Falcon.

Squadron Colours:

Esquadriha OK	Airacobra	n/a
Esquadriha XY	Mohawk	n/a
Esquadriha VX	Hurricane IIC	green
Esquadriha SU	Hurricane IIC	white
Esquadriha TY	Hurricane IIB	red
Esquadriha RV	Hurricane IIB	yellow
Esquadriha GL	Hurricane IIC	blue
Esquadriha MP	Hurricane IIB	green, white spiral
Esquadriha XZ	Spitfire IA	green
Esquadriha MR	Spitfire VB	yellow
Esquadriha RL	Spitfire VB	blue
Esquadriha ZE	Spitfire VB	red



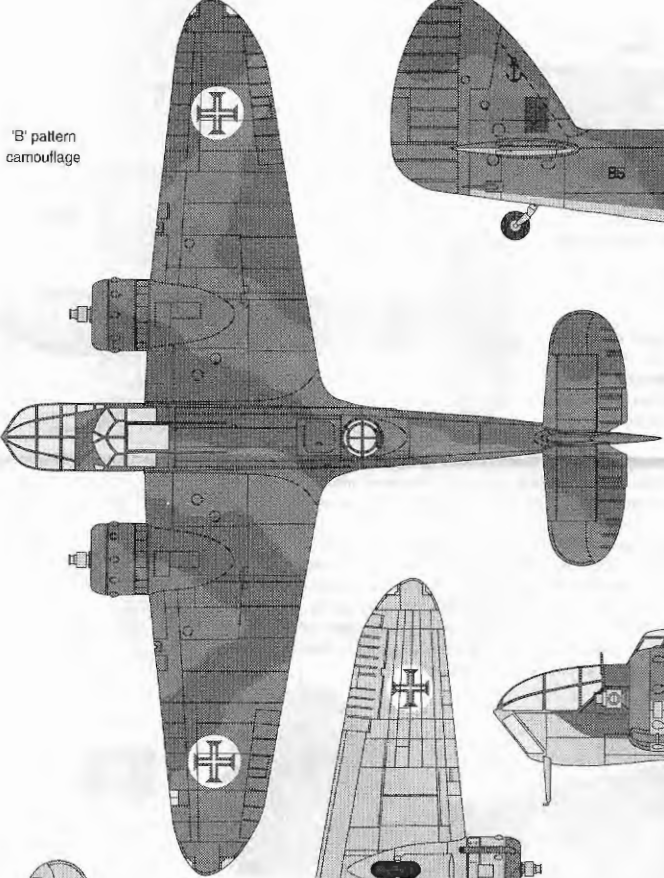
Portugese aviation is a topic largely unexplored in the English language.

Articles used to prepare these decals are found in:
 Air Enthusiast Quarterly, Number Thirteen (Best single reference)
 Flying Review International: April, June 1970 (Good general article)
 Air International: v22n1 & 2; Jan, Feb 1982 ()
 Air Enthusiast Magazine:
 Air Enthusiast Quarterly, Number Twenty-Eight (Blenheim)
 Air Forces International: July 1989 (Mohawk)
 Scale Aircraft Modelling: April 1985 v7n7 (Blenheim)
 Scale Aircraft Modelling: November 1988 v11n2 (Lightning)
 Squadron/Signal have published monographs in their "In Action" series on the P-38, P-39, Spitfire, Hurricane, and Blenheim which also contain information.

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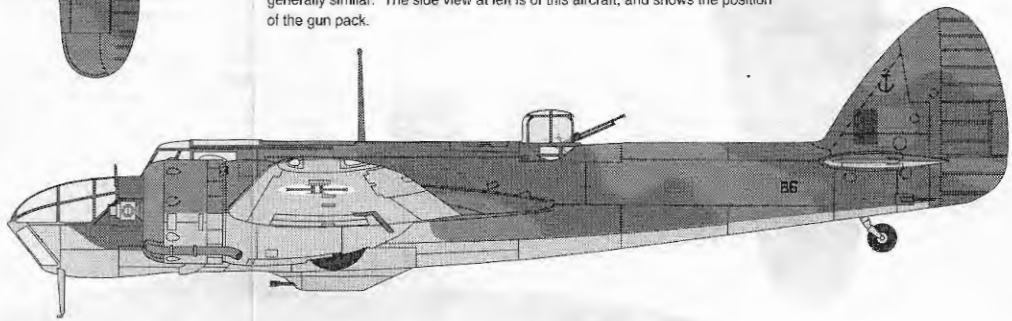
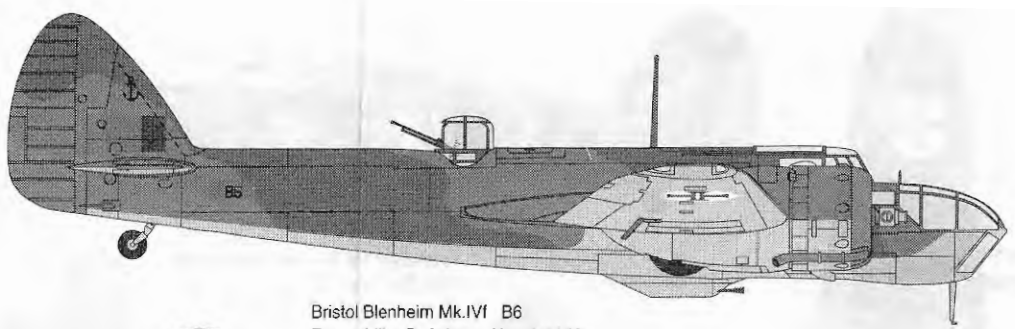
Decals for the Gloster Gladiator in Portugese service will be released in the near future. We would like to complete this presentation by offering markings for the Breda Ba.65, Ju-52g/3e, Ju-86K-6 at a future date, however we are hampered by a lack of information on markings and colour schemes. If anyone can help with more information, we would like to hear from you.

'B' pattern camouflage



Bristol Blenheim Mk.IVf B6
Esquadri ha B, Avia o Naval, 1943

Camouflage is in the standard British maritime colours of Dark Slate Grey and Extra Dark Sea Grey on upper surfaces, and with undersides in Sky. The serial appeared in black on the fuselage over a patch of fresh paint, and the Naval anchor is carried on the vertical stabilizer above the fin flash. National insignia are carried above and below the wings. Exhausts and collector rings are bronze. The underfuselage gun pack is deeper than that used on the Blenheim Mk.II, but generally similar. The side view at left is of this aircraft, and shows the position of the gun pack.



In 1943 Portugal received twenty Blenheim Mk.IVs. Eight Blenheim Mk.IV L bombers landed inadvertently on Portuguese territory en route to Morocco, and were promptly interned and then purchased from the British, who at the same time supplied a dozen Mk.IVf fighters for use by the Avia o Naval. The naval aviation arm suffered from a shortage of pilots, and the Blenheims were transferred to the Aeron utica Militar in early 1944. The Mk.IVf fighters were reconvered for the bombing role, and replaced the half-dozen obsolescent Ju-86K-6s which constituted the diurnal bombing force of Portuguese aviation. Based at Ota, they equipped Esquadri ha ZE until 1945, when the squadron was disbanded. Just before the war ended the British supplied Portugal with a dozen Beaufighter TF.10s, which took over maritime strike-reconnaissance tasks. The Blenheims were struck off charge, and finally scrapped in 1947.

Bristol Blenheim Mk.IV Esquadri ha ZE
based at Ota, mid 1944

One of the original eight Blenheim Mk.IV L bombers, this aircraft shows the markings applied to the aircraft of this squadron from early 1944. Colours are reported as being Dark Earth and Dark Green on the topsides, with undersides in Sky. Note that this aircraft is finished in the 'A' pattern, while the aircraft above is in the 'B' scheme. National insignia appear on both top and bottom of wing, and on the fuselage sides. The fin flash is slightly larger than on the aircraft above.

Dark Earth	Dark Green	Sky type 'S'	Dark Slate Grey	Extra Dark Sea Grey
30118	34096	34458	34096 + yellow	36118

'A' pattern camouflage

