Spitfire Mk.la

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INTRO

By the early 30s the Royal Air Force (RAF) was looking for replacement of its ageing biplane fighters like Hawker Fury was. The need of considerably faster aircraft was obvious, as the racing monoplane floatplanes of that time, fighting for famous Schneider Trophy, reached about twice the speed of the Fury. One of than most successful designers of the racing floatplanes was Reginald J. Mitchell. His best creation, the Supermarine S.6B, raised the world speed record to 407mph (655km/h) on September 20th, 1931 and British Air Ministry, under influence of such an achievement, issued the Specification F.7/30 in October 1931, calling for modern pursuit airplane capable of at least 250mph (400km/h) of maximum speed. Quite contrary to the demand, seven out of eight entries were again biplanes. The only monoplane proposal was Mitchel's Supermarine 224, but the design with a gull wing, fixed undercarriage and Rolls-Royce Goshawk engine was a disappointment in many areas, maximum speed being one of them. The Gloster Gladiator biplane was declared the winner and RAF had to wait for its monoplane fighters a little bit longer...

From disillusion to success

The fiasco with The Type 224 did not prevent Mitchell from further work. Instead of developing the 224 he persuaded the Supermarine company to fund the completely new design of Type 300, using brand new Rolls-Royce PV12 engine, later known as the Merlin. The Air Ministry expressed interest and issued Specification F.37/34 on December 28th, 1934 to fund the prototype armed with four guns. By early April 1935 Mitchell received the detail of Specification F.10/35, calling for eight guns instead. The change was possible, but only on cost of bomb provision removal and reduction of the overall capacity of the fuel tanks. The decision caused the so called "short legs" of the Spitfire, meaning a lack of range and endurance.

The Type 300 performed its maiden flight on March 5th, 1936. The K5054 prototype took off from the Eastleigh Aerodrome with chief test pilot Captain Joseph "Mutt" Summers at controls. After some eight minutes the pilot was so impressed, he reportedly said: "Do not change a thing!". In July 1936 the prototype completed its initial trials at Martlesham Heath successfully and during December it conducted further trials now with its full weaponry of eight 0,303in (7,7mm) Browning machine guns installed. During March 1937 the problem with the armament emerged, as the guns were freezing at high altitude. It took until October 1938 to introduce effective system of gun-heating, using he hot air from enlarged starboard underwing radiator. The modification was incorporated from 60th produced Mk. I and retrofitted to the earlier airplanes.

To the service

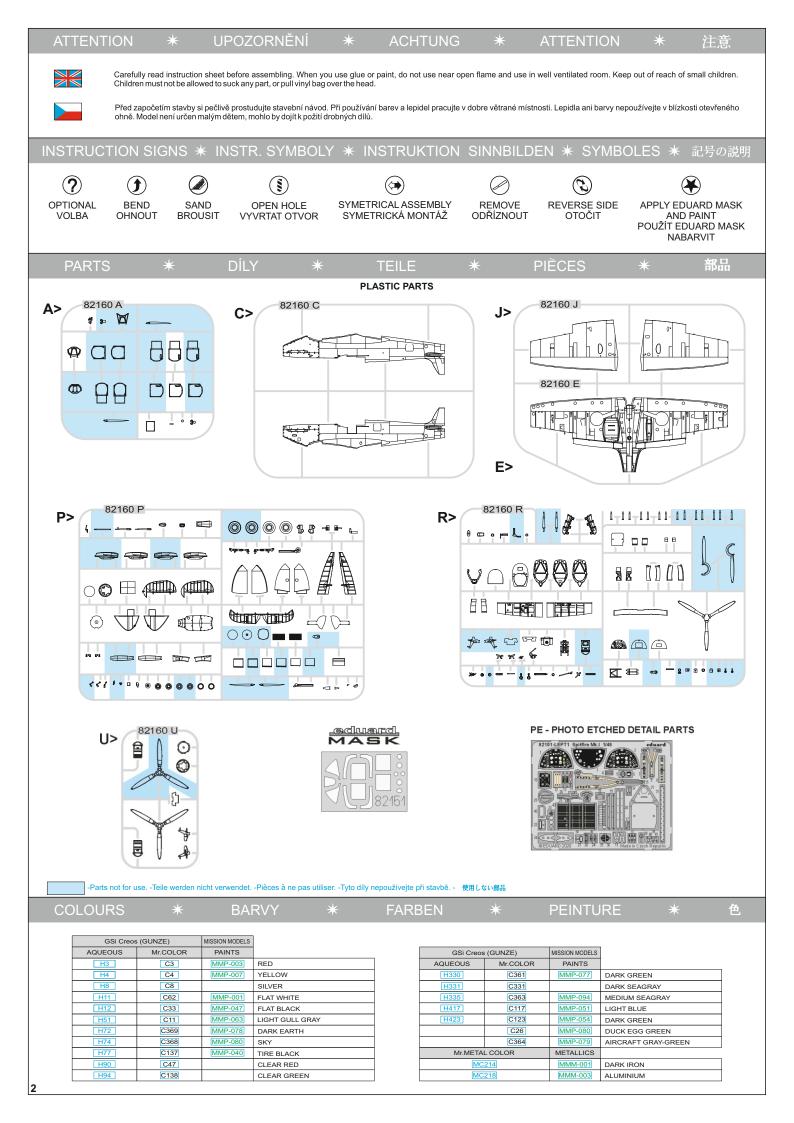
Initial contract for 310 Spitfires was signed in June 1936 and the first unit to receive the new fighters (during August 1938) was No. 19 Squadron at Duxford. At the time the Great Britain entered the war with Germany (September 3rd, 1939), the RAF had already taken delivery of 306 Spitfires serving with eleven squadrons and by the beginning of May 1940 a further eight squadrons were added. Unfortunately, Reginald Mitchell did not live to see the Spitfire serving with the RAF units, as he died on June 11th, 1937 at the age of 42. The burden of the Spitfire development was on Joe Smith afterwards. It is fair to say the production of Spitfire was far from smooth, especially due to complex design of its elliptical wing, so several subcontractors were to help to fulfil the orders.

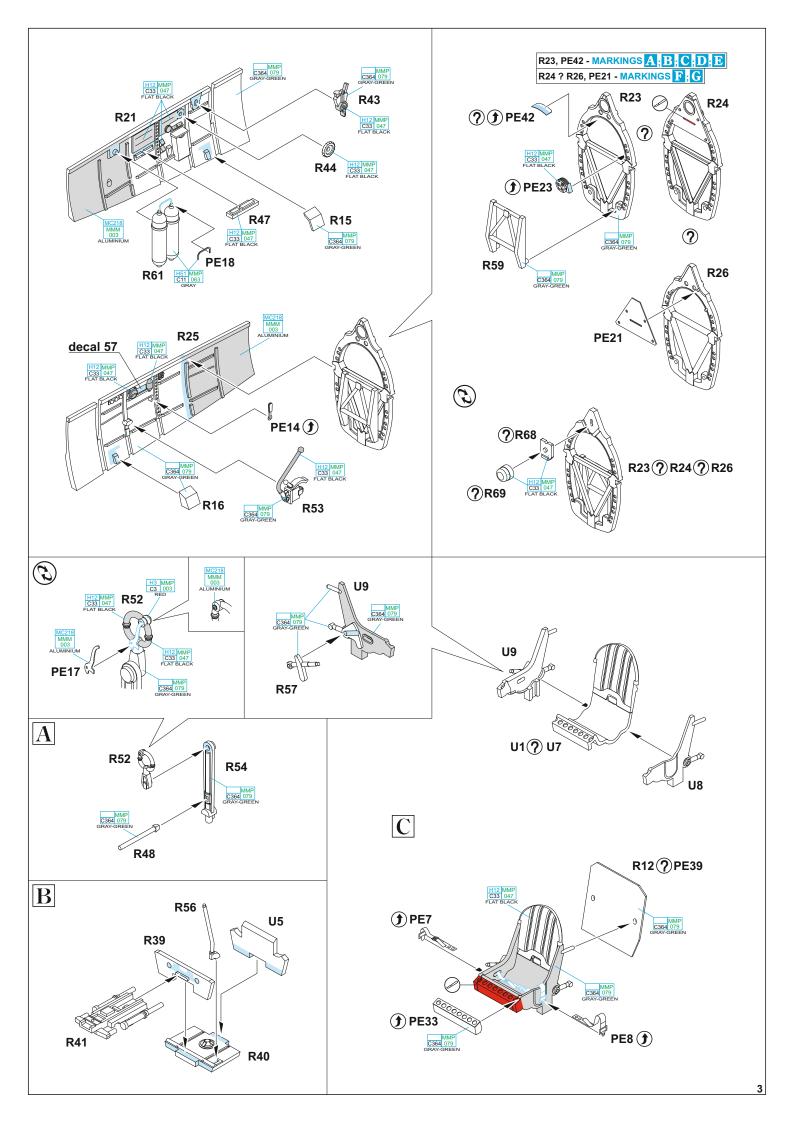
The first dogfight between Messerschmitt Bf 109s and Spitfire Mk. Is took place near Calais on May 23rd, 1939, but the first aerial victory over an enemy for Spitfire had to wait until October 16th, 1939, when nine Junkers Ju 88s attacked Royal Navy warships in the Firth of Forth. Two of them were shot down by pilots from Nos. 602 and 603 Squadrons. Half a year later the German forces launched their offensive in the West Europe and the Spitfires started to fire their guns in anger much more frequently with the glory time coming when famous Battle of Britain broke out in July 1940. Although the pursuit burden of the Battle was mainly on more numerous Hawker Hurricane, the Spitfire become an icon during the Battle, as it helped RAF Fighter Command to equal force with Luftwaffe's Bf 109s. During the period, some shotcomings emerged, firepower being one of them. It was believed during mid-30s that eight small calibre guns were the best arrangement, but the war experience proved it inadequate against multi engine bombers with self-sealing fuel tanks.

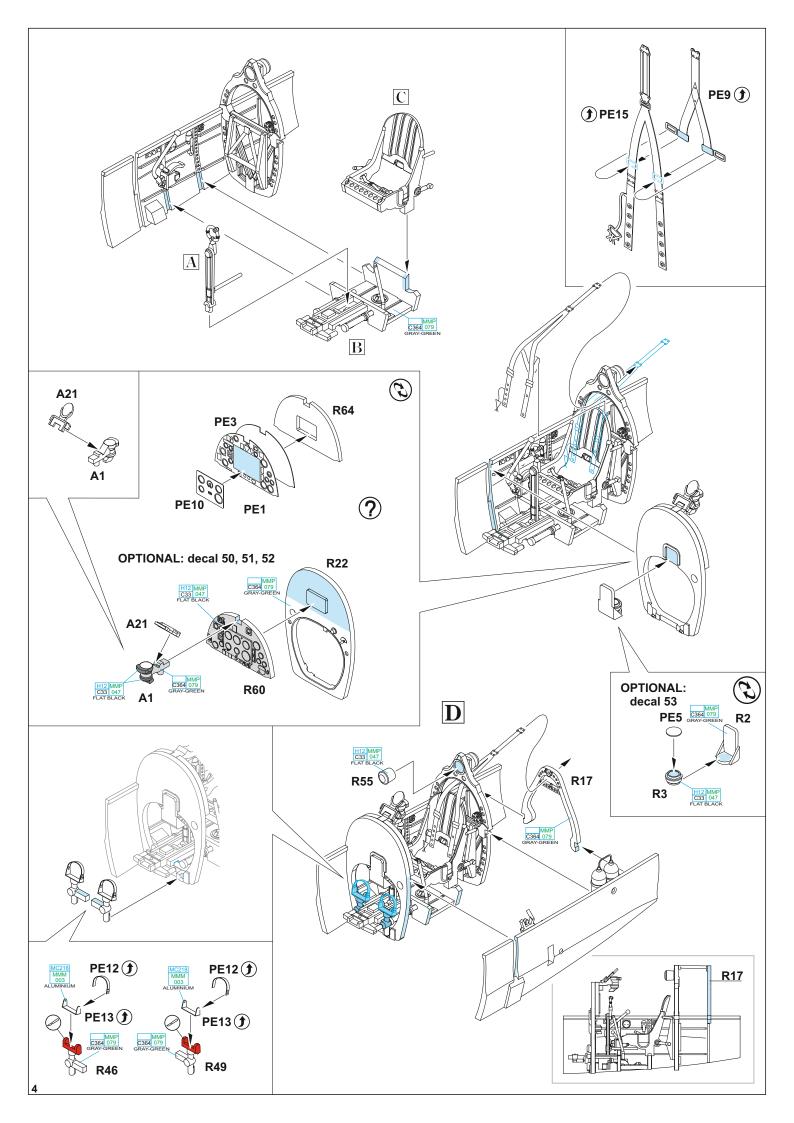
Constant development

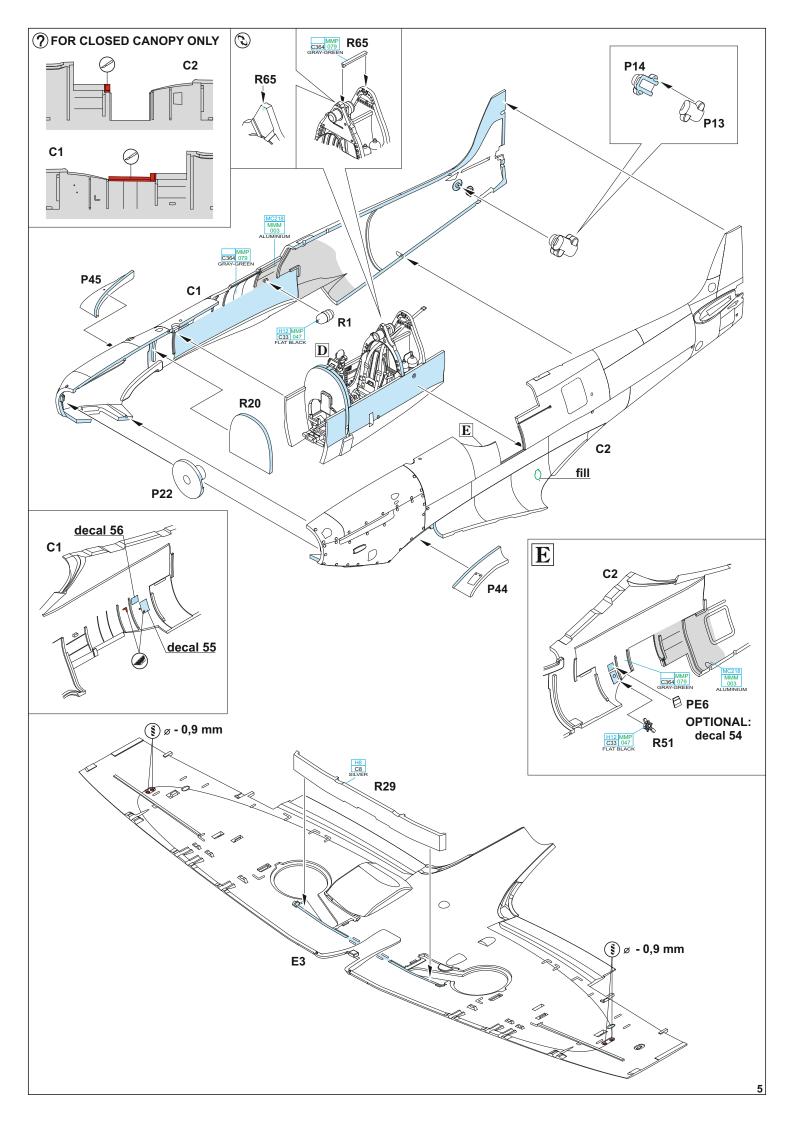
The development of Spitfire was ongoing process from early stage of its service. One of the first major upgrades was change from ineffective two blade fixed-pitch wooden propeller to three-bladed two-pitch metal one starting from 78th production aircraft (and retrofitted to the earlier ones). The move increased the maximum speed, raised the ceiling, and shortened the take-off run. Starting from May 1939 the Spitfire Mk. Is changed the power unit, switching from Rolls-Royce Merlin II to Merlin III with the same power 1030hp (768kW) but with reliability improvements, allowing the installation of constant speed Rotol propeller. That not only gave the Spitfire, now marked Mk.la, improvement in rate of climb, but also made it easier to control. Starting from the early 1939 the Spitfires received new semi-bubble canopy improving the pilot's view. The early Spitfires had simple ring-and-bead gunsight, starting from September 1939 the GM2 reflector gunsights were fitted.

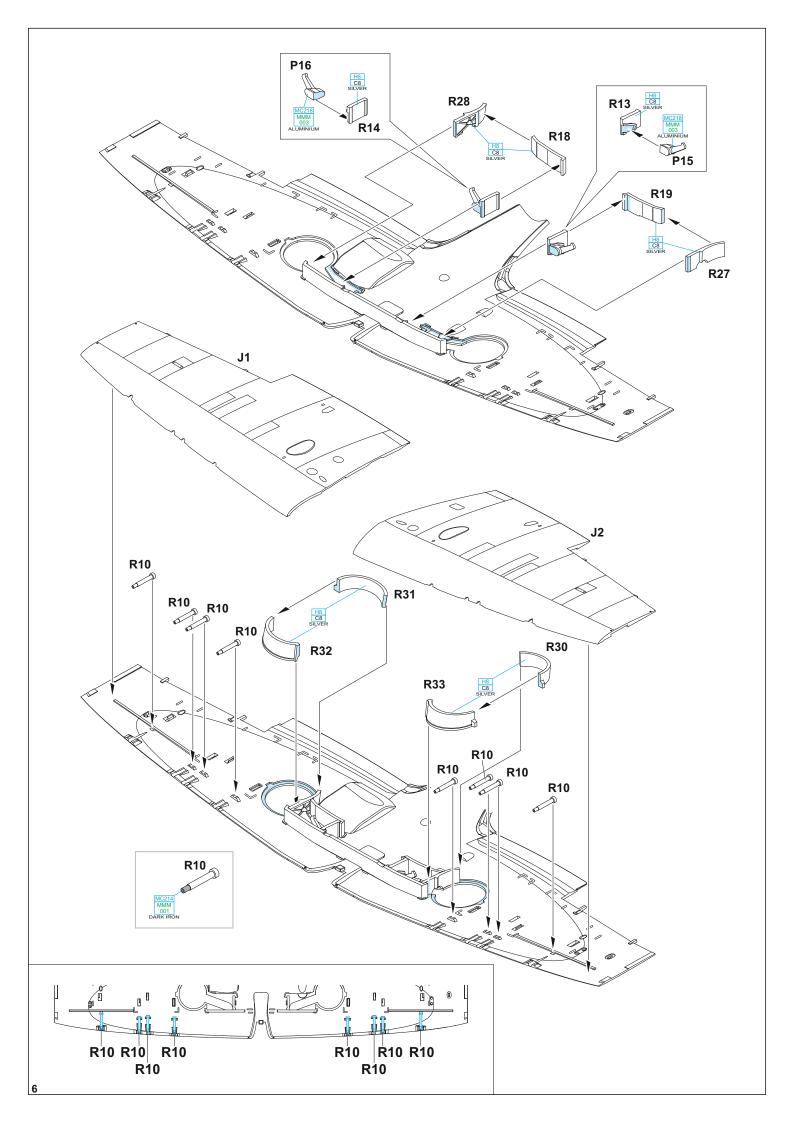
A very important issue was the armour, as the early production Spitfires had none. As a first measure the laminated glass was added to the windscreen. After that, the upper fuel tank received 3mm thick cover of light alloy, while lower one was protected by the Linatex sandwich (rubber and canvas). More to it, the steel plate was fitted behind the seat to protect pilot. The armouring added some weight. The first production Spitfire Mk.I was 5,819lb (2639kg), reaching top speed of 362mph (583km/h). In the summer of 1940 the weight of fully modified Mk.I rose to the 6150lb (2789kg) and the maximum speed decreased to 350mph (563km/h). But despite that the later aircraft were better fighters than the early ones. All in all, apart from the rather inadequate firepower for the time and some other shortages addressed on the fly, the Spitfire Mk.I proved to be extremely valuable fighter. There were 1,567 of all Mk.Is built. This model represents Mk. la marks and offers the parts for aircraft in several stages of its development.

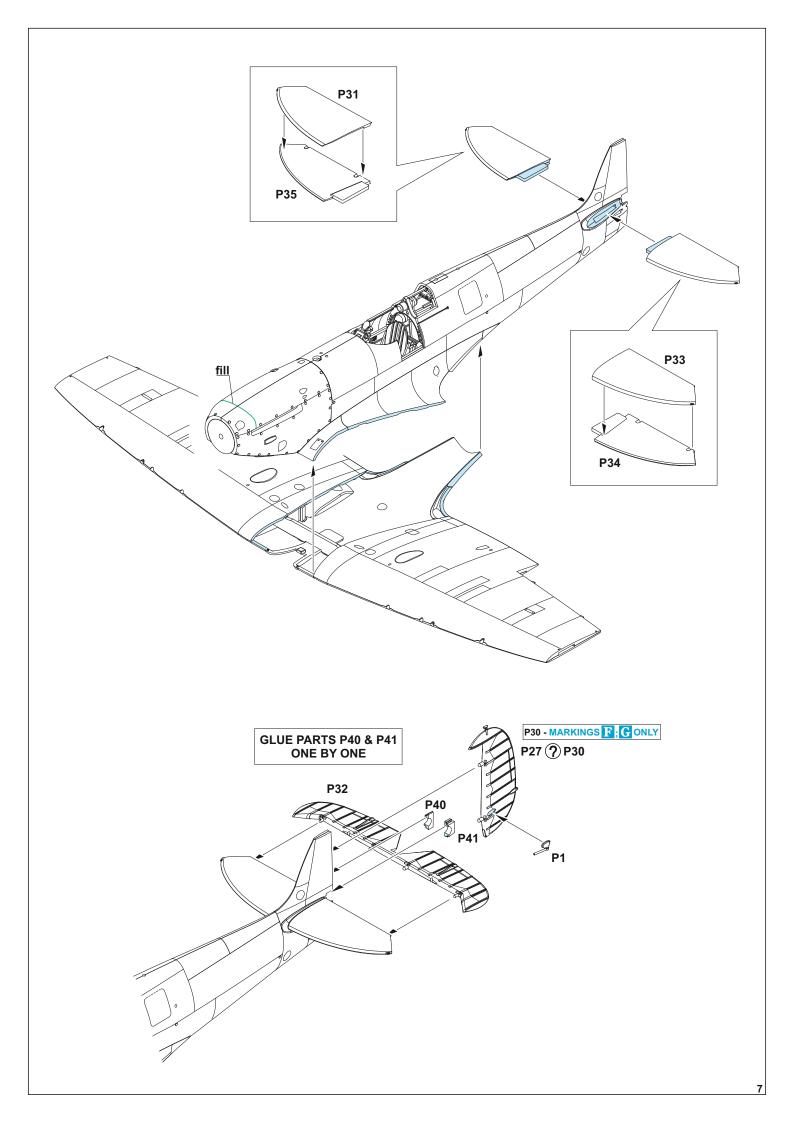


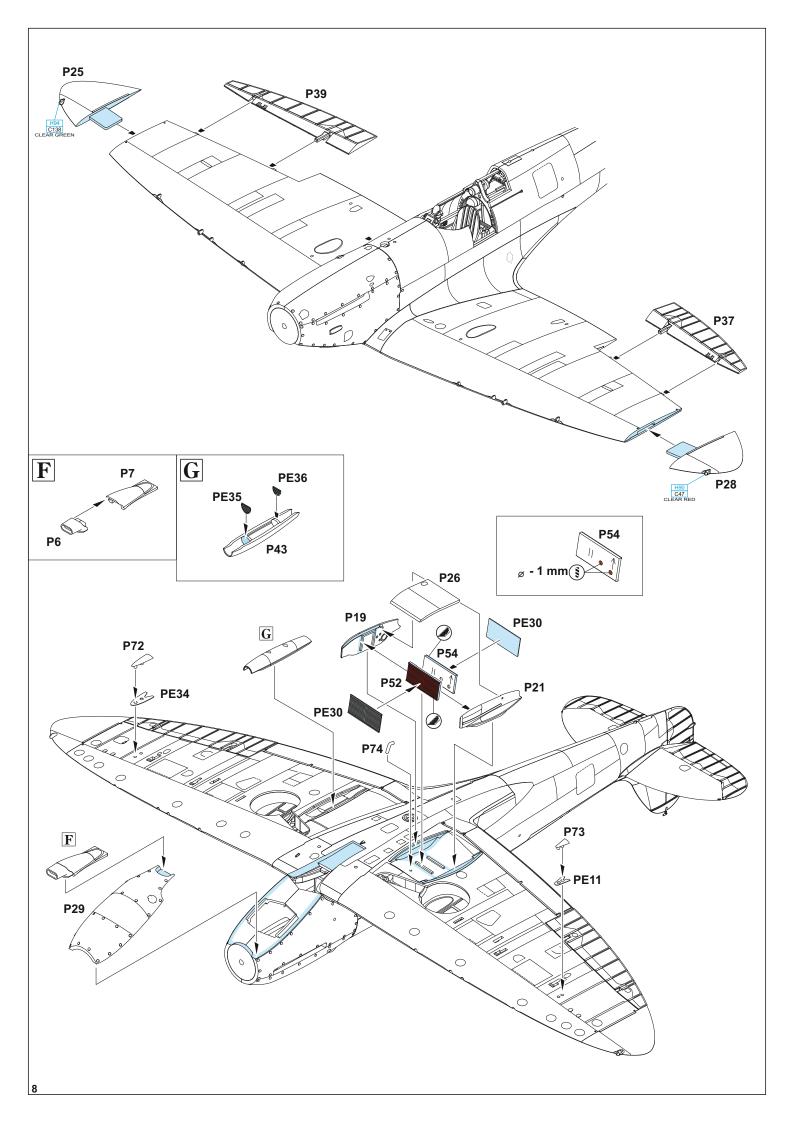


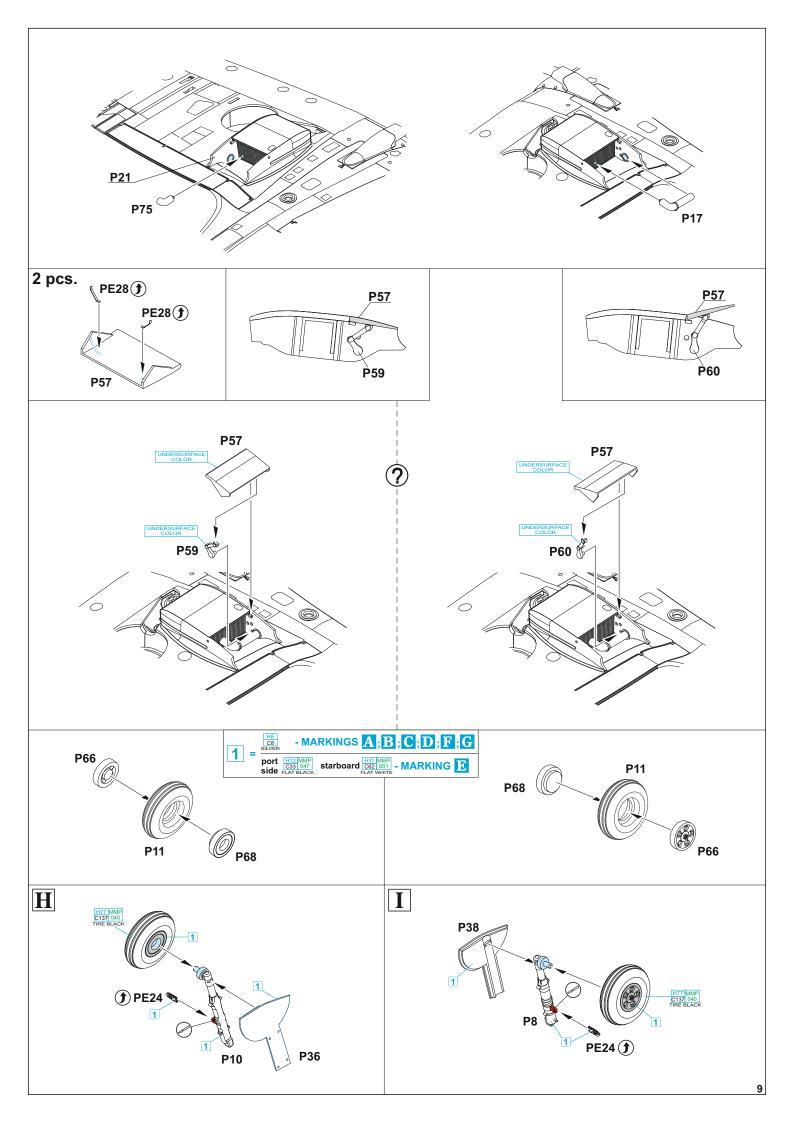


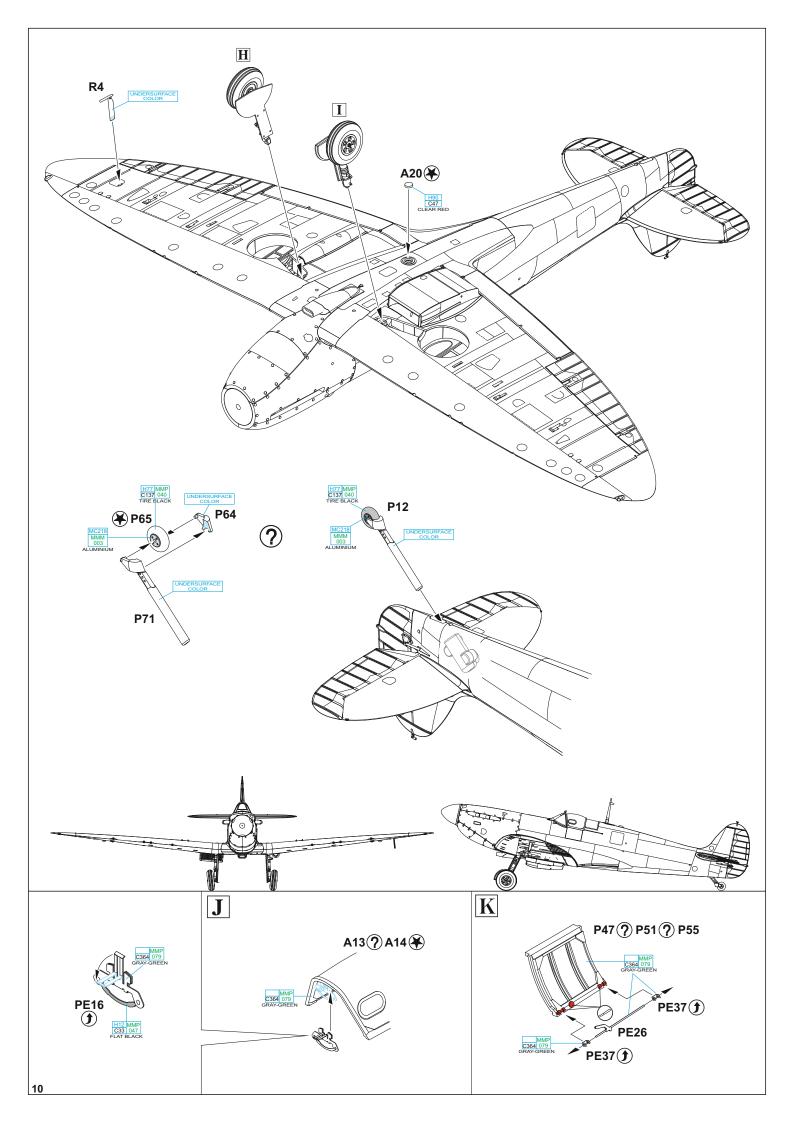


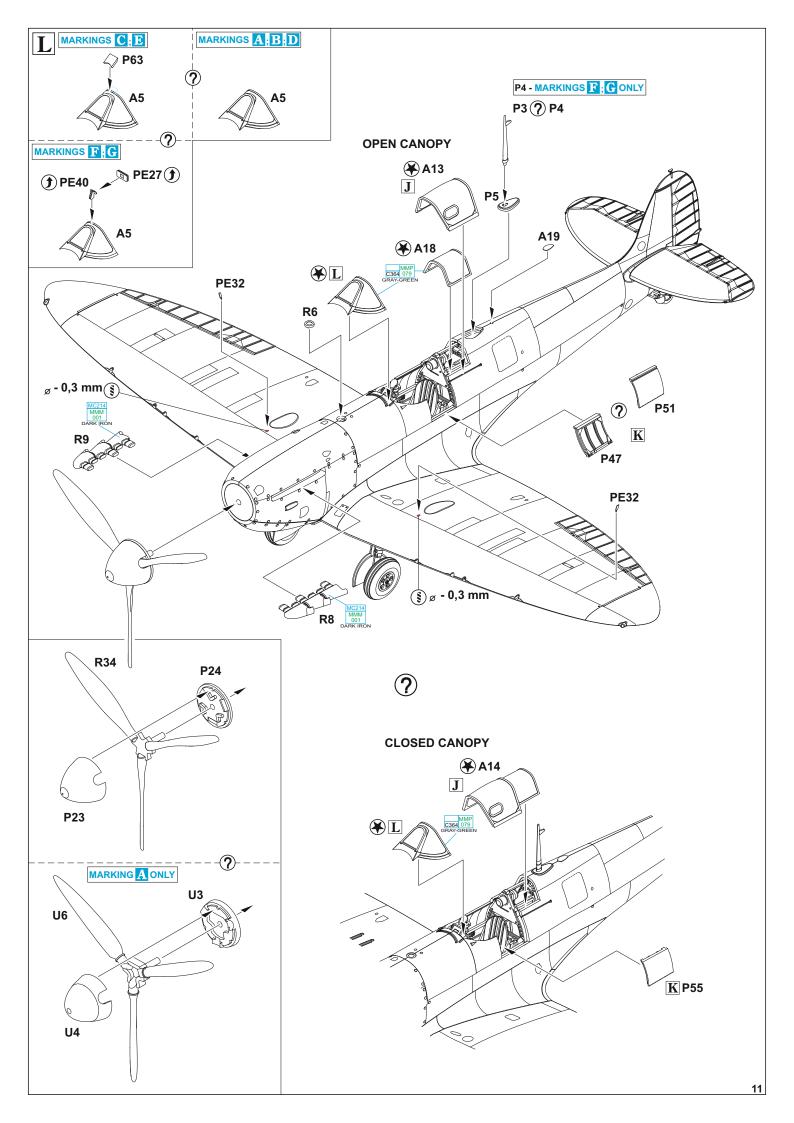


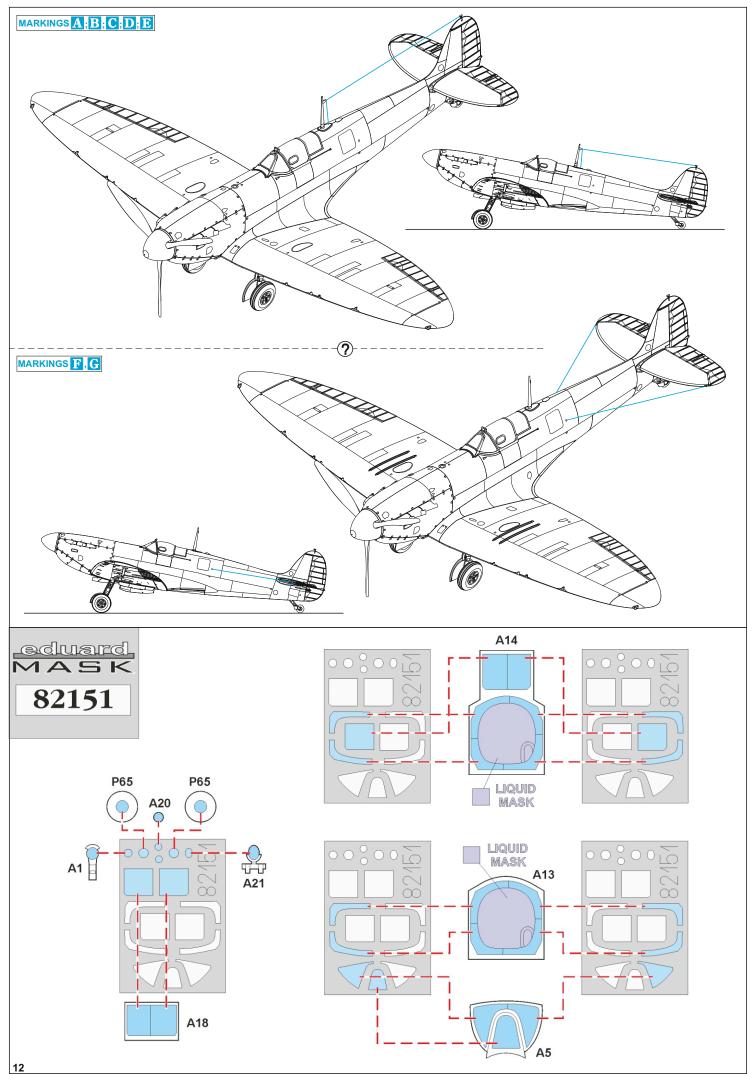






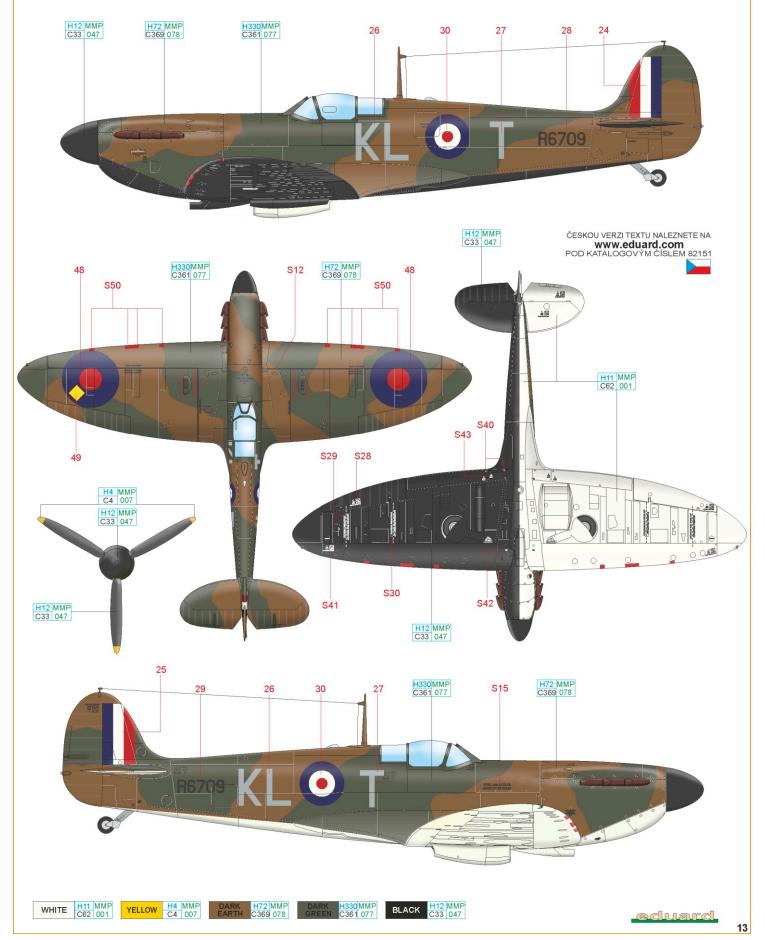






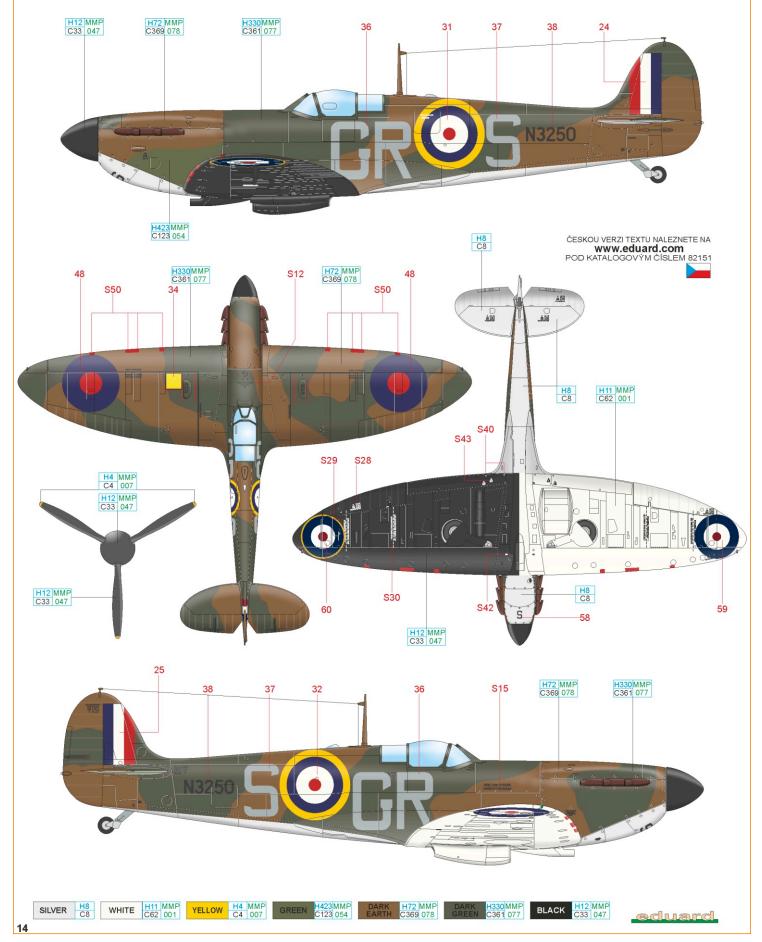
A R6709, flown by P/O Colin Falkland Gray, RNZAF, No. 54 Squadron, RAF Hornchurch, United Kingdom, March 1940

Flown by P/O Colin Falkland Gray, R6709, coded KL-T, wore the standard RAF Temperate Land Scheme of Dark Green and Dark Earth on the upper surfaces, and White/Night lower surfaces. Type A fuselage roundels, Type B upper wing roundels and Mixed Grey code letters were carried. No roundels on the bottom surfaces. Note the Rotol constant speed propeller. The aircraft was equipped with an older TR.9B radio, with the wire antenna stretching between the antenna mast and fin tip. The antenna mast isolator was a little bit shorter while using the newer TR.9D radio. There was no rear mirror or head armor yet installed. Colin Gray got his first kill, a Bf 109E, on May 25th, 1940, while escorting a Swordfish formation to bomb Gravelines. By early September he had claimed 14½ kills. He finished the war as Wing Commander with 27 kills, two shared, six probable and four shared probable kills. This score makes him the top scoring New Zealand fighter ace of the Second World War.



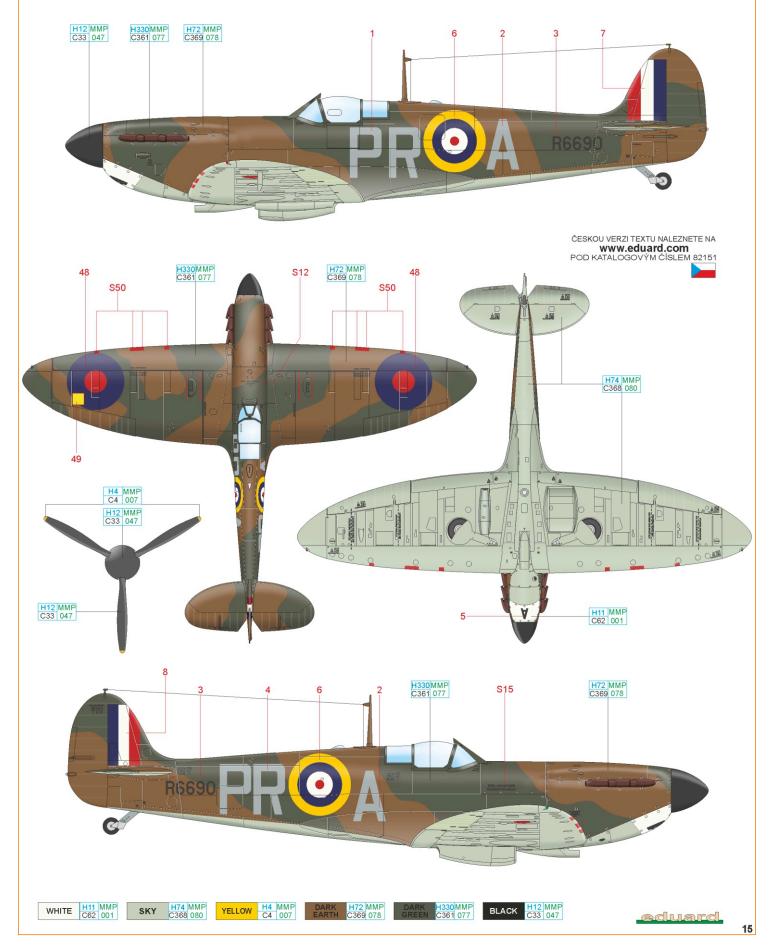
B N3250, flown by P/O Allan R. Wright, No. 92 Squadron, RAF Croydon, United Kingdom, late May / early June 1940

No. 92 Squadron received their first Spitfires in March 1940, replacing their Bristol Blenheim Mk.IFs. The squadron became operational on May 9th, 1940. Interestingly, the unit's Spitfires retained the pre-war GR codes until the end of July, when the switch was made to QJ. The code letters, as well as the fuselage Type A.I roundels, look to be non-standard. The bottom wing surfaces were standard black/white, with the remainder of the bottom surfaces in aluminum. The Type A roundels were added to the bottom surfaces during the Battle of France, being bordered in yellow on the left black painted wing. Note black aircraft code letter S painted on the bottom of the nose. Wire antenna was a component of the TR.9D radio that equipped this aircraft. It is believed that N3250 was flown by P/O Alan R. Wright, who flew his first combat mission on May 23rd, 1940. He claimed two Bf 110s damaged and another probably destroyed during this sortie over Dunkirk. The next day, Wright added a Bf 110 destroyed and one more probable. During WWII, he was credited with 11 confirmed kills.



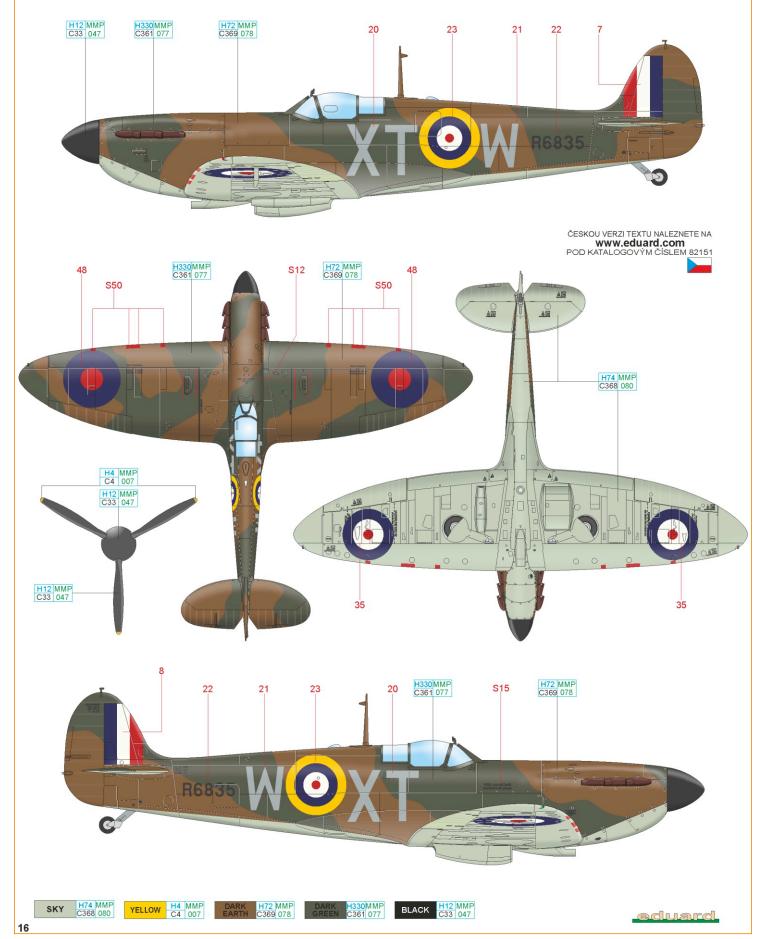
C R6690, flown by P/O John C. Dundas, No. 609 Squadron, RAF Middle Wallop / RAF Warmwell, United Kingdom, August 13th, 1940

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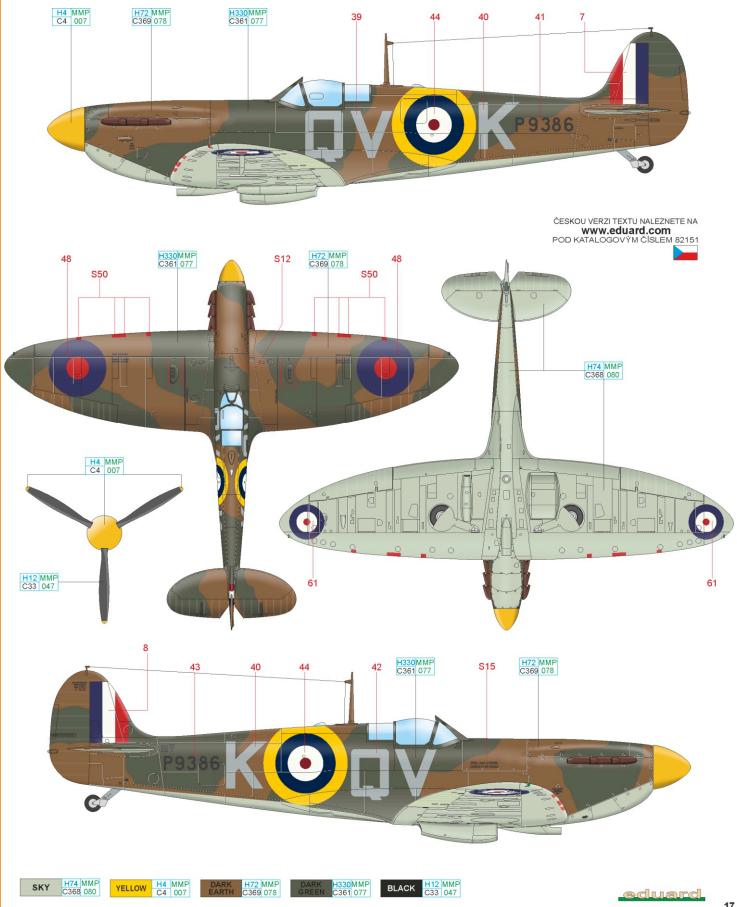
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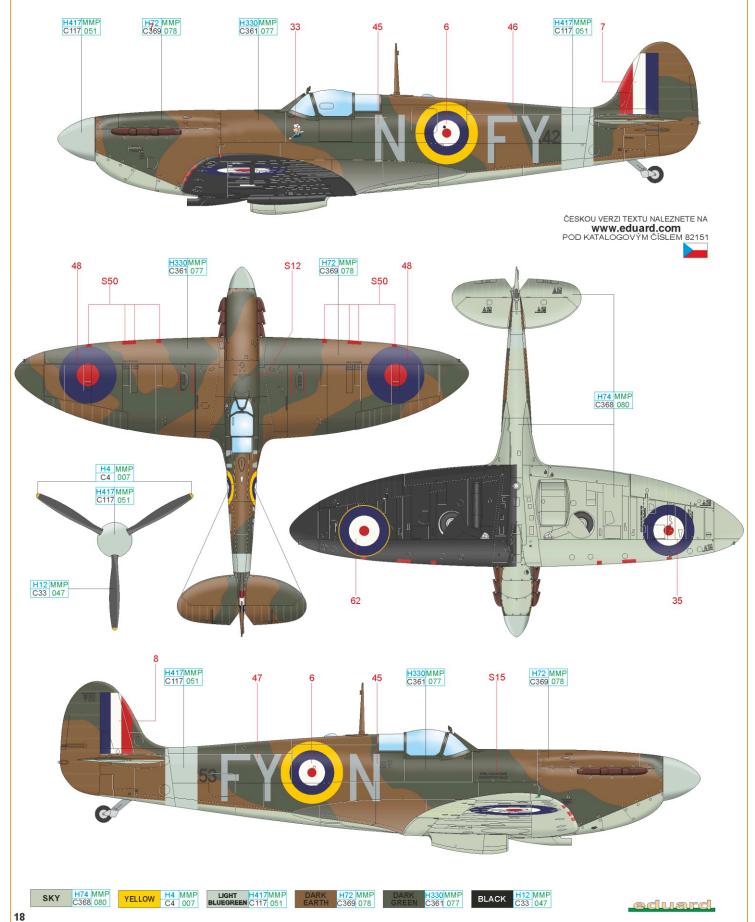
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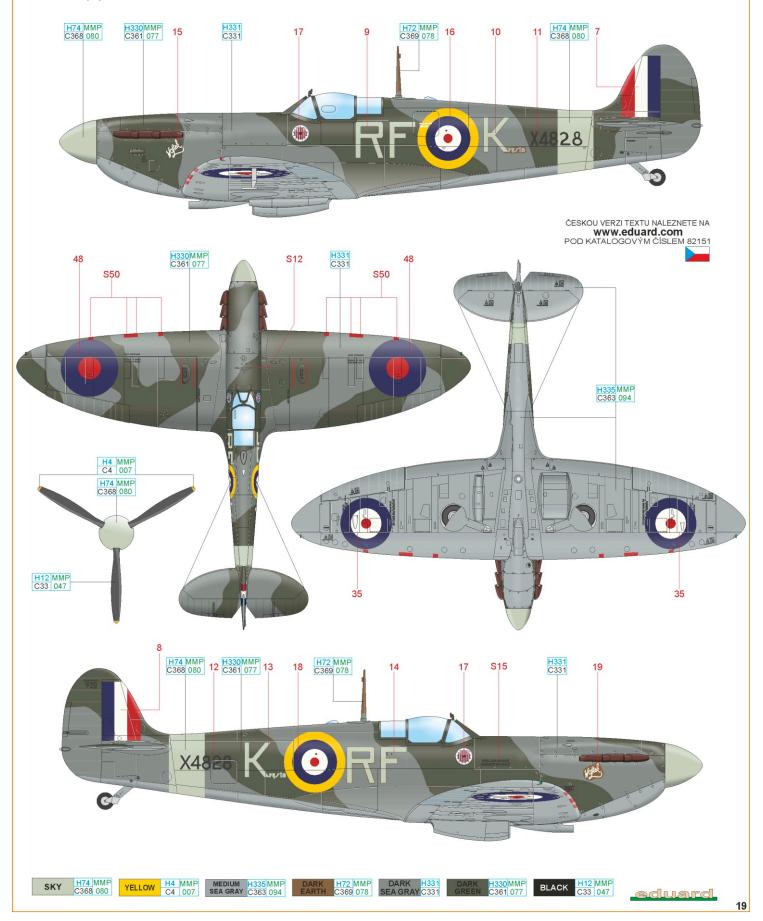
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This Spitfire Mk.Ia, serialled X4253, illustrates the camouflage scheme and markings of Fighter Command aircraft in late 1940 and early 1941. The black painted (Night) left wing was ordered by the Air Ministry on November 27th, 1940. The left wing roundel was then appropriately outlined in yellow. To improve recognition of friendly aircraft, an 18-inch wide Sky Blue fuselage band was added ahead of the tail, and the spinner was painted in the same colour. This paint was usually a little bit more blue than the standard under surface Sky. Some sources name this colour 'Air Ministry Blue'. This aircraft was equipped with the new VHF TR.1133 radio and, as such, there is no aerial between the antenna mast and the fin tip. The R.3002 IFF device was carried, indicated by the two associated wire aerials stretching between the fuselage sides and the leading edges of the horizontal tail. Note the external rearview mirror, and the armor plating behind the pilot's head was installed. This aircraft was flown by future ace P/O Wilfrid G. Duncan Smith, who joined No. 611 Squadron at RAF Hornchurch in October 1940 with the rank of Pilot Officer.



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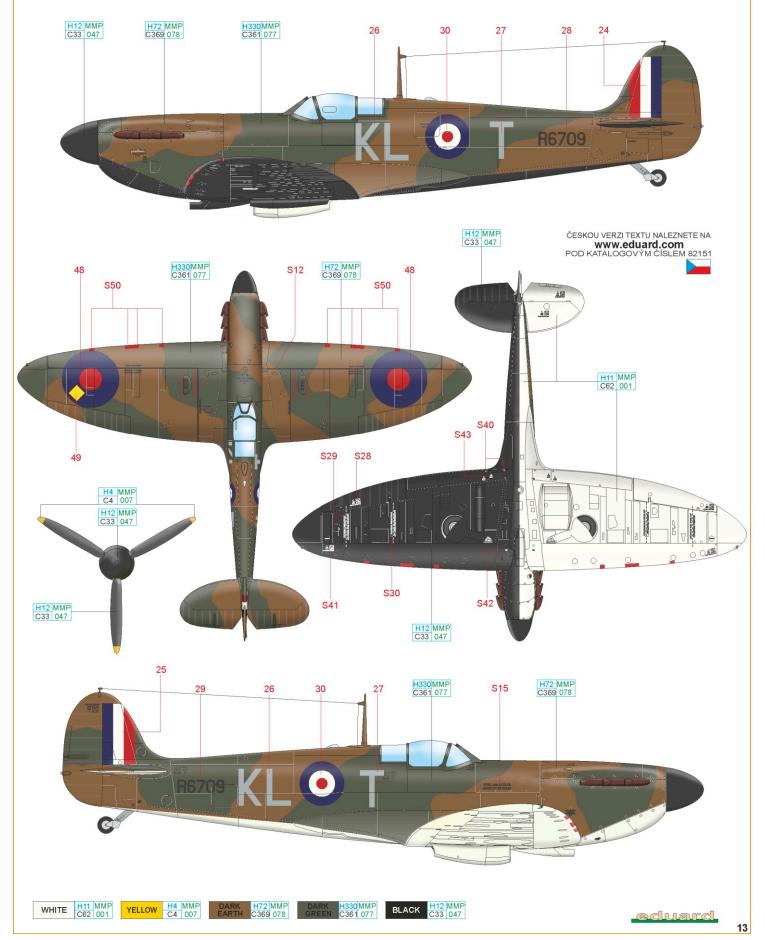


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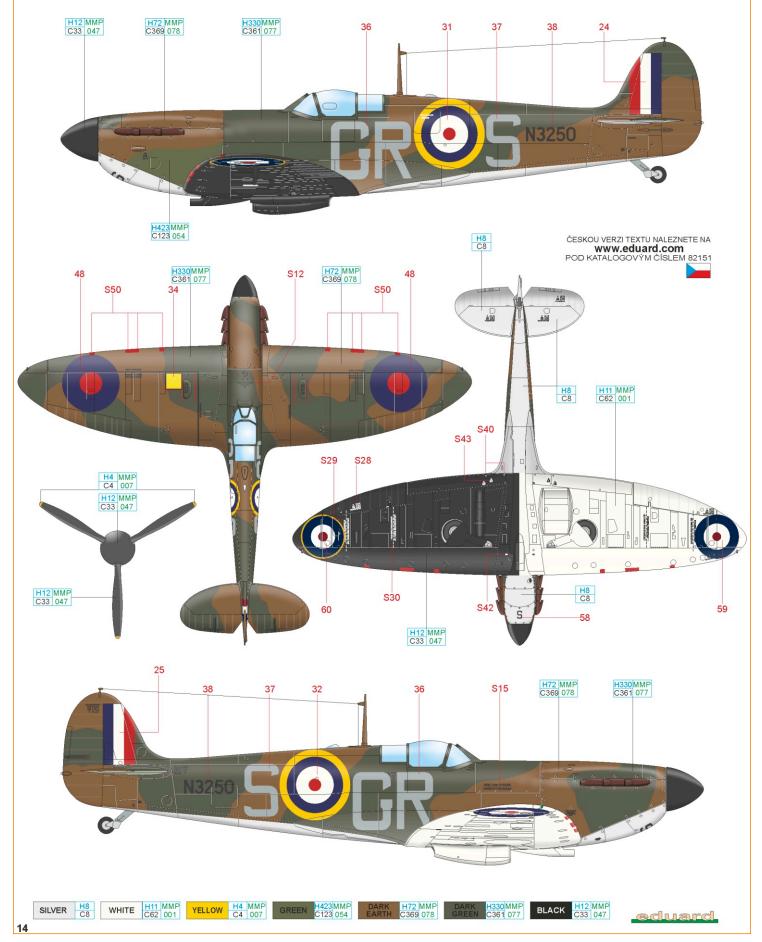
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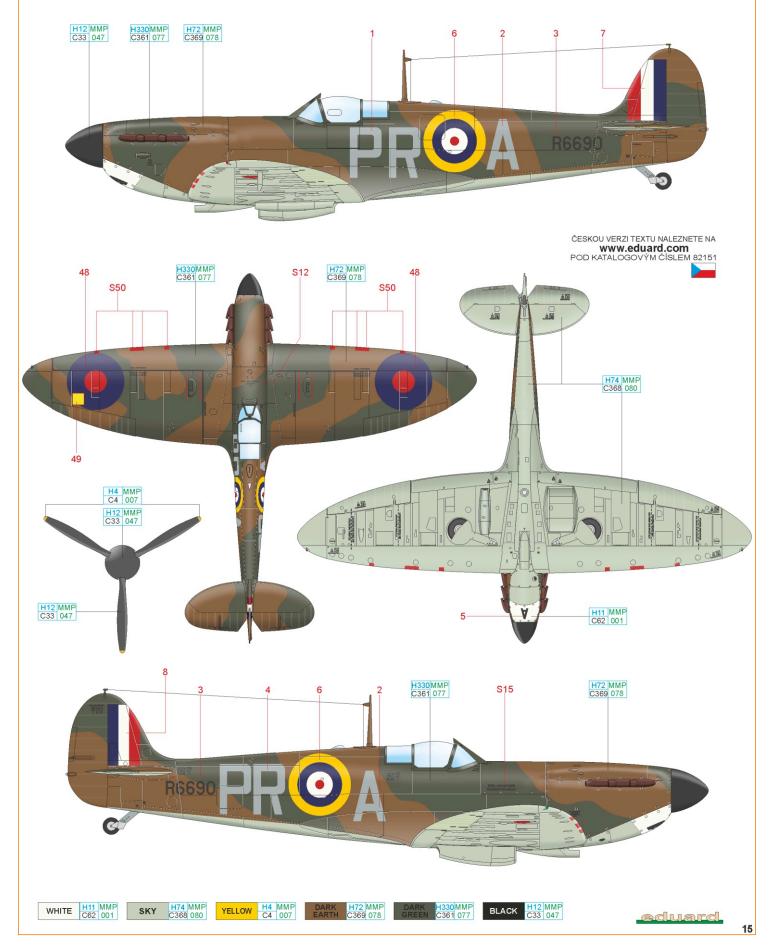
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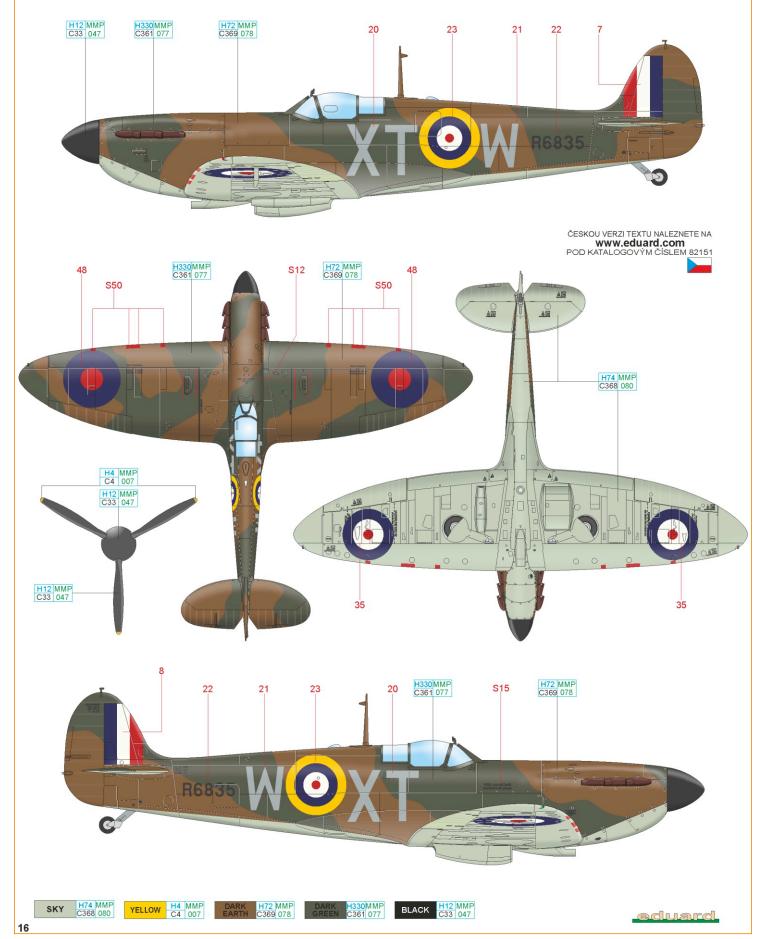
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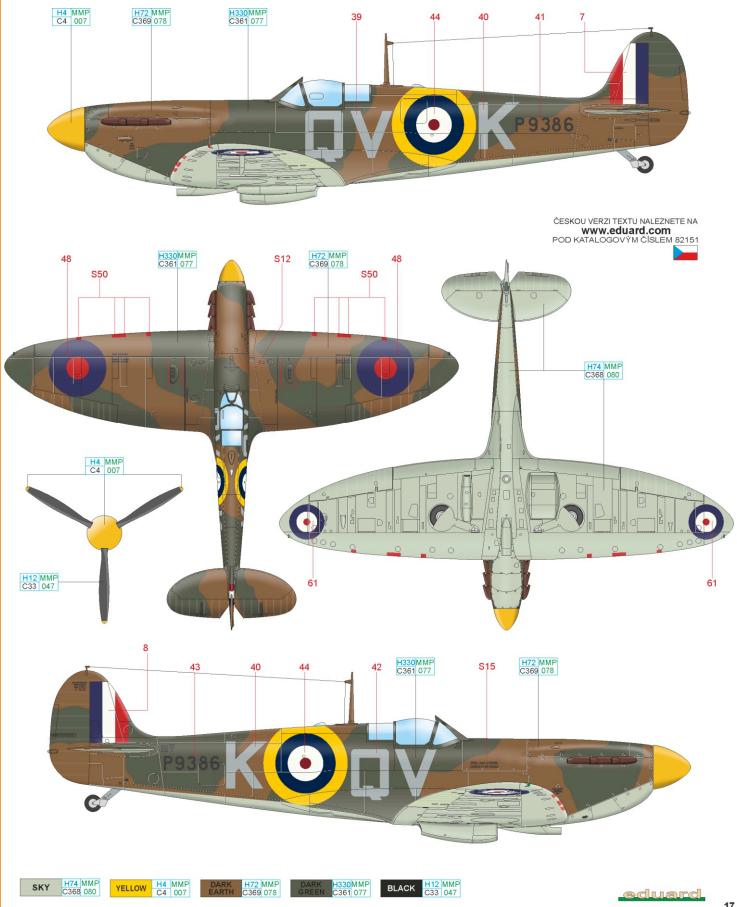
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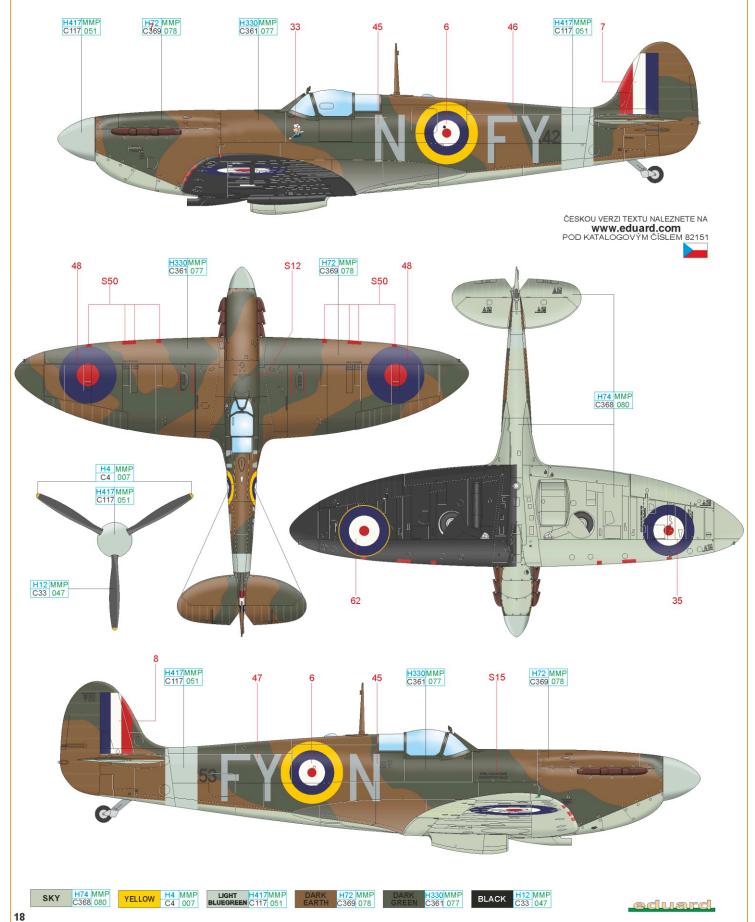
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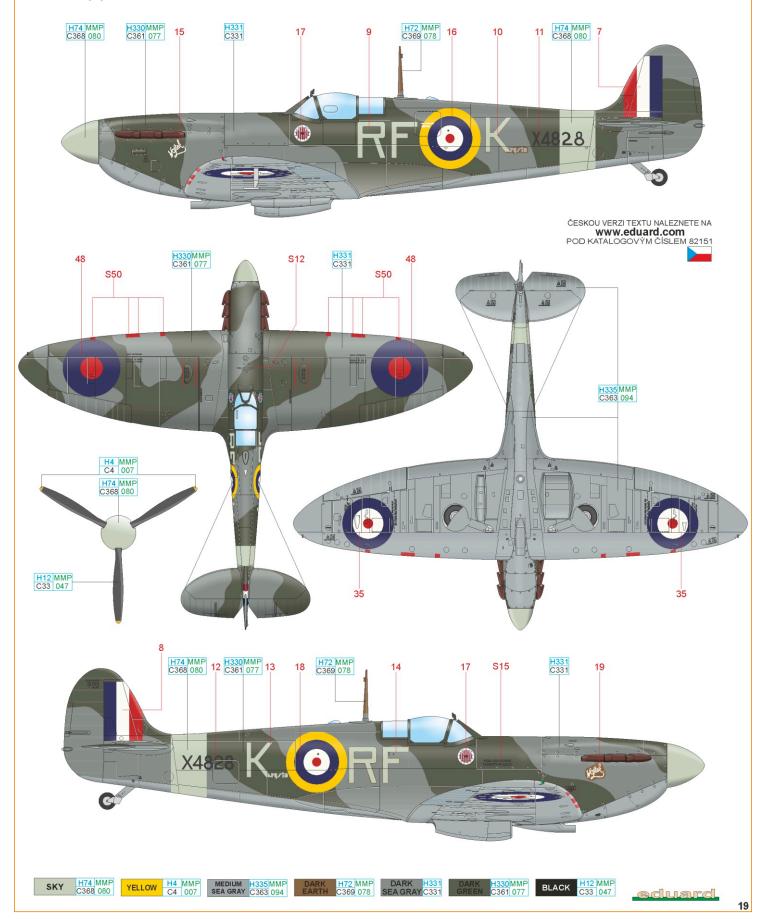
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