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Introduction

THE IMAGE IS ICONIC AND THE history one of wartime victory against the odds. Yet in many ways, the advent of the Supermarine Spitfire was a minor miracle in itself.

The authorities of the early to mid-1930s could not be accused of having any sense of urgency when it came to developing Britain's air defences, or re-arming after the First World War in the event that another world war could be possible. The First World War was often described as 'the war to end all wars', and its brutality and horror left governments terrified at the prospect of further conflict. The 1930s was also a period of economic recession and unemployment in Britain; resources were scarce and most politicians did not wish to spend money on armaments. While Churchill saw the looming threat of Hitler's rise to power, many in the British government remained anti-war.

Britain's aviation industry was seriously under resourced and the Royal Air Force (RAF) had been greatly reduced in size, with very little being spent on aircraft development. Back in 1918, Britain had boasted the world's strongest air force. Yet by the early 1930s, the country was ranked fifth amongst the world's leading air powers. By the mid-1930s, the encroaching threat of war with Hitler's Germany

could no longer be ignored: Germany was re-arming and the Luftwaffe was expanding at a much faster rate than the RAF. As a consequence, prototype new fighter planes – the Hurricane and the Supermarine Spitfire – were ordered for the RAF at the end of 1934. By the end of the 1930s it was obvious to many countries, including Britain, that Hitler had built up a mighty war machine.

The first Hurricane prototype took to the skies in November 1935, and the Supermarine Spitfire soon followed. The Spitfire's original designer, R. J. Mitchell, had designed many planes for aircraft manufacturer Supermarine by the time of its auspicious first ever test flight in March 1936 with Vickers Aviation's chief test pilot, Captain J. 'Mutt' Summers at the controls. Yet this was no instant success story: Mitchell's original design for a new fighter plane (dubbed 'The Shrew') designed to the exact specification of the Air Ministry, had originally been tested in February 1934 by Summers. Unfortunately, the plane's cooling system let it down and it failed to impress.

Undaunted, Mitchell returned to the drawing board. This time he bypassed the Air Ministry specifications to design a thinner elliptical wing, a smaller span and a cockpit with a Perspex cover. Plus, of course, a distinctive Rolls-Royce Merlin engine. His Spitfire plane wowed the watching air marshals and won the day. Yet although the successful Spitfire test flight – an acknowledged turning point in aviation history – led to a contract being issued in June that year for Supermarine to produce 310 Spitfires, the frontline operational strength of the RAF remained pitifully weak when compared to that of Germany's Luftwaffe, and it was

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not until 1940, after war had been declared, that Spitfire production really got going. Sadly, Mitchell never knew the true success of his inspirational design as he died just one year later from bowel cancer, aged only forty-two. A year later the Spitfire entered RAF Squadron service, delivered to 19 Squadron at Duxford. The subsequent development of the Spitfire from that initial Mark I pioneer through to twenty-four different Spitfire types or marks was due to the talents of the Supermarine team, headed by Joe Smith, Mitchell's successor as Chief Designer.

Even in those early war years, however, it had still been touch and go when it came to getting the plane off the production line: in May 1940, for instance, the Air Ministry came perilously close to cancelling orders because the Spitfire required a lot of hand-building and finishing, making it more costly than anticipated. But the orders were completed and, that same month, inspired by the efforts of Canadian media tycoon Lord Beaverbrook (Max Aitken), Spitfire fundraising to build the planes – £5,000 per Spitfire was the figure given at the time – took off at breakneck speed across Britain and around the world.

The general public had become increasingly aware of aviation, queuing up to watch air displays and willing to pay five shillings a time at flying circuses, where pilots toured the country and treated the paying public to a thrilling ride in their planes. While Hurricane fighter pilots shot down more enemy planes than the Spitfire and, indeed, more Hurricanes took to the skies in the Battle of Britain, it was the Supermarine Spitfire that captured the public's imagination, thanks in part to its glamorous ancestry via