

Mortal Combat

They saw each other at the same moment.

The shadow of the 109 with Major Otto Gratz at the controls had briefly flitted across the canopy of Flying Officer Aleksy Smrz's Spitfire which, in turn, had reflected the sunlight into the searching eyes of the Luftwaffe's ace killer, known from his spinner as the Yellow Peril.

The 109 was about two thousand feet above and to the right of the Spitfire and going in the opposite direction.

Smrz initiated a climbing turn to his right while Gratz started a diving turn to his right.

Smrz was no stranger to combat. From the first to the seventeenth of September 1939 Smrz and his fellow Polish pilots had fought a losing battle against superior German aircraft.

Gratz in turn had honed his skills in the Spanish Civil war of 1936 to 1939 as well as from the first of September up to now. He had started gliding at 15 as a member of the Hitler Youth and proved to be a natural pilot from the start. At the formation of the Luftwaffe in 1936 he was already an accomplished pilot.

On the seventeenth of September, the Polish High Command had ordered all their pilots to fly to Rumania before proceeding to France.

They soon realised that the French had no fight left and crossed the Channel to England where, under pressure from the Polish Government in Exile, the RAF reluctantly took them aboard.

Smrz arrived in England in January 1940, was assessed and posted to a Spitfire conversion school.

He was sent to an operational squadron at the end of July 1940. He had had exactly two weeks combat experience in a Spitfire when he broke all the rules following a report that the Yellow Peril had just shot down an aircraft off the coast near Pegwell Bay. He took off on his own from Hornchurch's satellite field at Rochford.

As the two aircraft converged neither pilot let the other out of their sight.

Gratz knew that he had been sighted but his arrogant confidence was so high that he wanted to meet his adversary on the same level rather than following the fighter pilot's dictum of using the advantage of height.

Smrz watched as Gratz levelled out as he reached the Spitfire's height. Smrz followed suit and faced his adversary.

The two aircraft were closing at nearly 600 miles per hour and heading straight for each other.

The 109 was the first to open fire, his tracers streaking over the Spitfire's cockpit.

Smrz did not waver but aimed at the yellow nose. When the 109 was virtually filling his windscreen, he squeezed the trigger.

They were like two poker players - each waiting for the other to flinch first.

Gratz did. He flicked the 109 over the Spitfire as its tracers flashed below him.

Both men changed their speed for height and turned towards each other again.

Their closing speed now much slower.

Gratz was the first to fire again but he was already flinching from a head-on collision and preparing to dive under the Spitfire so that his tracers flashed below its belly. Smrz did not fire.

Now Gratz had no idea what the state of the Spitfire's guns were. Had they jammed? Was he out of ammunition? Or playing a game?

At this height the 109 could out-dive the Spitfire but not out-climb it.

Smrz zoomed up. Was the German out of ammunition that he'd dived or was he low on fuel and deciding to run for home? Or was he building up speed to zoom up?

He could not know that for the first time in combat Gratz's confidence had been shaken by a Spitfire pilot who seemed prepared to ram his opponent.

He knew the capabilities of both aircraft as he'd flown a captured Spitfire and knew exactly what its strengths and weaknesses were. He knew that the Spitfire's Achilles heel was its carburettor. If he could get his adversary upside down for a length of time or in a negative G arc the Merlin could be starved of fuel.

Smrz rolled upside down to see where the 109 had dived to. But Gratz had zoomed up immediately after the Spitfire had flashed over him.

Not spotting the 109 he rolled back and climbed at full throttle.

Both aircraft were manoeuvring at full throttle and using fuel at more than four times the rate of their cruising speed.

Smrz knew that if the 109 was low on fuel he would execute a split-S and run for home and he would have no chance of catching the German.

The Spitfire was going up vertically when he spotted the 109 rolling off the top of his zoom and starting down towards the Spitfire.

Smrz was down to 90 miles per hour, slowing, and in danger of stalling on the climb while Gratz was accelerating towards him.

Gratz was closing too fast on the slow moving aircraft and could only get in a short inaccurate burst, before flashing past the Spitfire.

Smrz had stupidly taken the Spitfire into a Hammerhead stall while Gratz was zooming for height again.

Smrz recovered and pulled the Spitfire into a tight circle, accelerating all the time. He knew that he was at the mercy of the German.

The 109 made a high speed pass but misjudged the turning Spitfire's speed and his tracers shot past behind his adversary.

This time Gratz levelled out at the same height and began turning to get on the Spitfire's tail.

Smrz glimpsed this and knew that the 109 was now behind him but not seeing him in his mirror he craned his neck to try and spot his adversary. He pulled the Spitfire into a tighter turn.

When tracers began streaking past him again he realised that Gratz had slid in behind him. A glance in the mirror confirmed that this was so.

Gratz was flying the Emil, the 109E which had leading edge slats to improve handling. As a result, no matter what Smrz did the 109 would turn inside him. He tried every trick in the book to shake the German but to no avail. The 109 stuck like glue behind him. He has taken a few hits from the its 7.62 machine guns but no vital damage was done.

In desperation, Smrz tried something he and his comrades had played with in their pre-war aerobatic contests. He pulled up and simultaneously rolled to the left and kicked in full left rudder. Then he shoved the stick full forward. The Spitfire did two full rotations before running out of energy. He neutralized all the controls and the Spitfire recovered nose down. Gratz was a little dumbfounded as he saw the Spitfire tumble. He tried to follow with a conventional manoeuvre. This meant that he shot past Smrz who was now on his tail. Gratz pulled up instinctively and Smrz followed. The superior climb of the Spitfire now proving advantageous. He let fly with a burst from his eight guns and noticed some hits on the 109.

The two aircraft levelled out again and as they did Gratz slammed his throttle closed. Smrz jinked to avoid ramming the 109 as he passed it. Immediately two 23 mm cannon shells slammed into the Spitfire. The right hand one exploded somewhere in the engine compartment and the Spitfire began trailing thick oily black smoke. The other shell exploded as it slammed into the instrument panel, showering Smrz with glass.

He slumped in the seat, knocked momentarily unconscious by the concussion of the exploding shell.

The Spitfire nosed over into a shallow dive.

Suspecting that his opponent was doomed, Gratz pulled up on the starboard side next to the Spitfire. His ego always wanted him to gloat at a vanquished victim.

As Gratz peered into the Spitfire's cockpit Smrz regained a semblance of consciousness and became aware of the 109.

An insensate loathing welled up inside him as he looked at the German. To be defeated by this hated foe was not in his universe.

His left hand still rested on the throttle while his right hand clutched the stick.

With a supreme effort of will, driven by an unspeakable hatred, he rammed the throttle against the gate, rolled ninety degrees to his right and pulled the stick into the pit of his stomach.

With the Merlin, mercifully, still screaming at full throttle the Spitfire's nose swung toward the 109.

Completely taken unawares by the actions of the assumed doomed pilot Gratz was a little slow in responding.

He too dropped a wing and began a sharp turn to the right to evade his turning foe.

He was fractionally too late.

The Spitfire's propeller bit into the underside of the 109, chewing its way through the wing fuel tanks and into the cockpit.

A split second later the Spitfire's burning oil ignited the 109's fuel and the two aircraft were torn apart in a giant fireball.

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