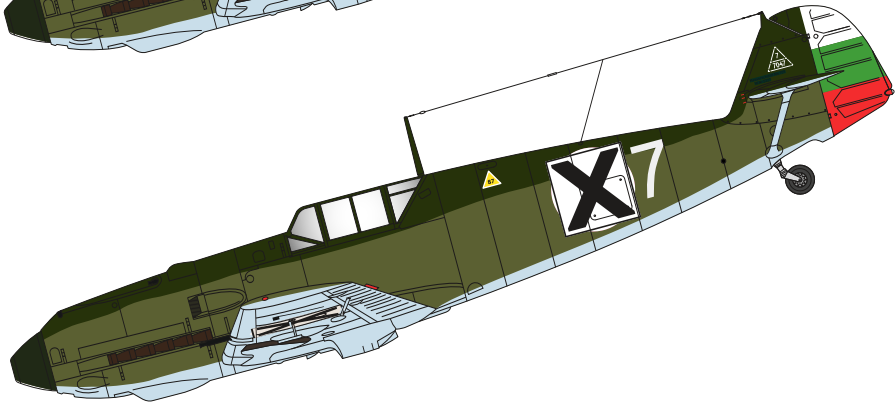
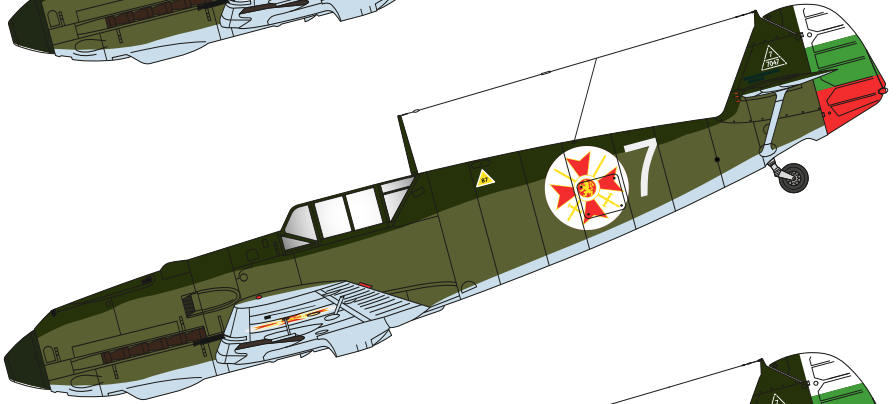
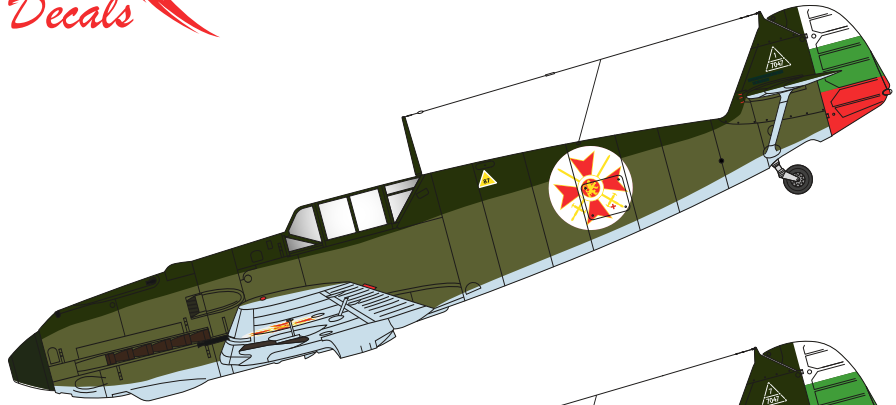




# Bulgarian Arrows #1

Bf 109 E-3a in Bulgarian service - part 1



ED 48004

ED 72004

# Bf 109 E-3a in Bulgarian service

The formal rebirth of the *Vazdushni na Negovo Velichestvo Voyski* (VNVV, or His Majesty's Air Force) happened at 27 June 1937, when Tsar Boris III handed over the combat flags to the four newly formed *orlyatsi* (air groups) at Bozhurishte air base. At this time Royal Bulgarian Air Force used 12 German He-51s, 12 Polish PZL P-24E fighters and 6 German Fw-56 training aircrafts. A month earlier, Tsar Boris III received a dozen Arado Ar 65 fighter planes and a dozen Do 11 bombers as a gift from *Reichsmarschall* Göring. Monarch donated these planes to the Royal Bulgarian Air Force.

In the spring of 1939, Bulgaria bought from Germany over 200 ex-Czechoslovak warplanes, including over 70 (77?) Avia B.534 fighters.

With the acquisition of ex-Czechoslovak, Polish and German fighters in 1937-1939, the fledgling Bulgarian fighter air arm received a much needed numerical boost in aircraft. However, within a couple of years it became clear that this was only a stop-gap measure, as the era of the agile but slow biplanes or gull-wing fighters had passed.

Since Bulgaria was increasingly turning toward the resurgent Germany and Italy, the choices were pretty much limited to what these leading Axis countries had to offer. As Italy herself was in desperate need of modern monoplane fighters, only Germany was left as a viable source.

The Bulgarian Government informed Germans (July 1939) that it wished to purchase ten '109s'.

In early March 1940 a Bulgarian delegation visited *Messerschmitt Flugzeugwerke* AG in Augsburg.

The Bulgarians' aim was to secure purchase of the Bf 109, enough to equip a fighter squadron.

At the end, a draft contract was signed on 4th April 1940 which stipulated the sale of ten Bf 109 E-3 fighters and six Bf 108 trainers. The ten commissioned aircrafts were brand new ones, built at *Wiener Neustädter Flugzeugwerke* (WNF) in Wiener Neustadt (Austria)

The transport arrived by train to its destination station, Dragoman, on 17 April 1940. The crates were downloaded from the rail cars later then month and transported to the main military airport of Bozhurishte, where they arrived in early May. Once there, the airframes were assembled at the local airplane factory, under the supervision of Messerschmitt technicians. After the test flights, performed first by German factory pilot, then by his Bulgarian counterpart, the aircraft were handed over to the Royal Bulgarian Air Force.

Even before the Bf 109E actually entered service, the type officially received a typical Bulgarian code name *Strela* (**Arrow**) by the air force decree dated 15th May 1940. The bright yellow engine cowling, followed by a rearward tapered yellow flash along the fuselage, indeed gave the sensation of an arrow to the onlooker. The Bf 109E was assigned the military register number 7047. The VNVV serial numbers ran from 1 to 10, and coincided with the last digit of the original German *Werknummer* (5221 to 5230)

Order the battle, dated 1st July 1940, the date the *6 Iztrebitelen Polk* (Fighter Regiment) officially formed, does not list the Bf 109Es, as probably they were not combat ready. When they eventually entered active service in August, the ten Bf 109Es were assigned first to unnumbered *Yato Strela*, then to 682. *Yato* of 1/6. *Iztrebitelen Orlyak* (Fighter Group), based at Marno-Pole near Karlovo. When 692. *Yato* was formed in October, the ten '109s were split in two, and assigned in equal numbers to both squadrons.

After signing the Tripartite Pact on 1st March 1941, which allied Bulgaria to the resurgent Germany, Italy and Japan, i.e. the Axis, Berlin was more eager to export weapons to its newest ally, knowing they would be put to the advantage of the Axis' cause. One of the first deals struck was the delivery of nine additional Bf 109Es, which would complement the existing ten *Strelas*.

The contract, calling for the sale of nine used but refurbished Bf 109 E-3a, was signed on 17th July 1941. These airplanes were manufactured by different factories in different timeframes, and had suffered various degree of damage prior to general overhaul and upgrade to E-3a standard.

The nine refurbished aircraft arrived on flatbed train to Karlovo station on 23rd August 1941 and were subsequently assembled, assisted by factory technicians. After the fighters were declares fit for service, they were assigned to the same main unit, the independent *6th Iztrebitelen Polk*. They received Bulgarian serial numbers from in the 11-19 range.

After the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, it became necessary to strengthen air defense of the Black Sea coast, despite the fact that Bulgaria and the Soviet Union were not officially at war.

On 10th October 1941, a special '*Galata*' *Orlyak* was established, which included separate *Strelas* from 682. *Yato* (Balchik airfield) and 692. *Yato* (Sarafovo airfield).

These nineteen Arrows constituted Bulgaria's entire air defense until the end of 1942.

Four of them survived until 1946.

info based on Denes Bernad book „Bulgarian Fighter Colours 1919-1948“ published by STRATUS s.j.



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