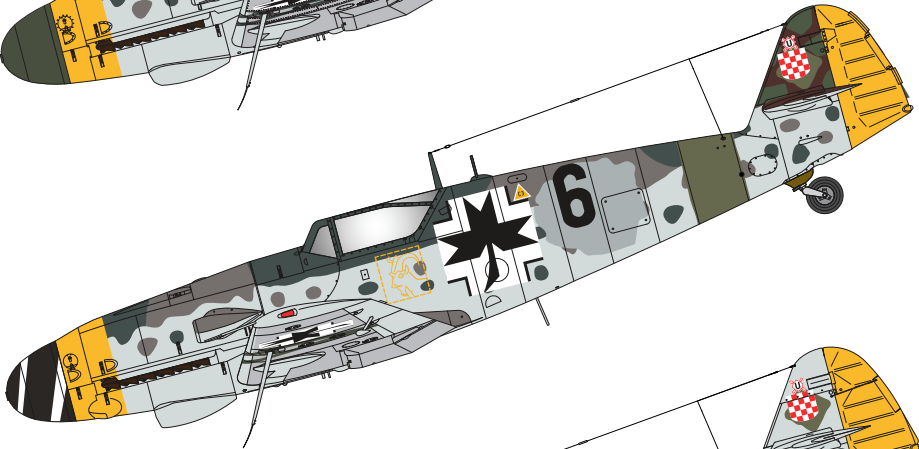
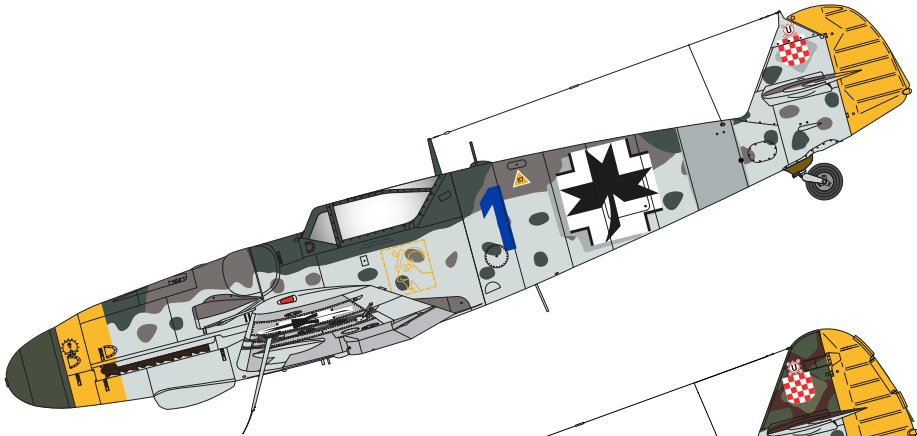




Croatian Ultimate Fighter #1

Too Little, Too Late...

Bf 109 G in Croatian service - part 1



ED 48008

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Bf 109 G in Croatian service

By late summer 1944, German defence lines were collapsing throughout Europe. After Romania and Bulgaria changed sides, the RLM finally decided to offer some visible assistance to its neglected ally.

The contract signed on the 15th October included 30 Messerschmitt Bf 109s, 10 each of G-6, G-10 and G-14 in three separate shipments. About a month later, Croats were informed that they could send the pilots for acceptance of the first batch of 10 aircrafts.

The first batch of 10 Gustavs reached Lučko Airfield at 1st December. In the meantime, ZNDH (Zrakoplovstvo Nezavisne Države Hrvatske) got its first Messerschmitt, a Bf 109 G-14/AS which was brought to Borongaj as a personal gift to gen Kren (chief of ZNDH) on 24th November 1944. The new fighters were assigned to 2.Ilovačko jato (LJ - Fighter Escadrille), which by then operated a mix of CR.42s and G.50s.

Being a sole fighter unit in the area, the Croats expected to be quickly included into the Reich's defence network (Reichsverteidigung), but to their surprise Germans forced them to leave Lučko and move to Borongaj Airfield which had been left in ruins by American heavy bombers.

During the short transfer, at least two Gustavs crashed when landing at Borongaj.

By mid-December, the second batch of 10 Gustavs was delivered to Borongaj by German pilots. By year-end four Gustavs had already been written-off in accidents and acts of sabotage, with two pilots being injured. In early January 1945 2.LJ (now 2.ZJL - zrakoplovno Ilovačko jato) became the sole fighter unit of ZNDH. At the time, 12 out of its 17 Bf 109Gs were operational, and from 12 MS.406s seven G.50s and two CR.42s which were attached to it, just a pair each of Freccias and Moranes were airworthy.

By the end of January 1945, the RLM allowed delivery of 75 more aircraft and gliders to the ZNDH, among them 10 Bf 109 K-4s and 4 Bf 109 G-12s. Finally, in the mid-February, Germans informed that the aircrafts were ready. Croats received 10 Gustavs (third batch from October contract), 4 K-4s, and only one G-12. Back over Austria two Gustavs collided in a snowstorm (both planes had been destroyed, one pilot was seriously injured but second was dead), two K-4s had been damaged by fresh snow during landing on Lučko Airfield (machines flipped over their noses and fell on their backs) and G-12 belly-landed in Borongaj.

In early March 1945, the Germans finally agreed to let 2.ZLJ back to Lučko.

With the re-established surveillance and guidance system, the Croat Messerschmitts were integrated into the southernmost part of the Reich's defence. Finally, after months of waiting, three Gustavs took-off at 8.00 on 10th March, on an armed recce over Partisan airfields at Čemernica and Metlika and landed back at Lučko at 9.20, thus accomplishing the first combat sorties. On that day, ZNDH had 23 Bf 109s on its strength, 15 at Lučko and 8 at Borongaj, but only 13 of these were airworthy.

Most of the flying was done in Rotte (pairs) or Schwarm (two pairs) strength and included sweeps, armed reconnaissance, bomber escorts and occasional scrambles. Due to cooperation with 17 Flieger-Division (former Flie.Fü. Nordbalkan) 2.ZLJ suffered no shortage of fuel and lubricants and there was plenty of flying, both in combat and training, but the accident rate was very high. The first combat losses of the 2.ZLJ were suffered on 24th March, when a pair of Bf 109s encountered seven Thunderbolts belonging to the 85th Fighter Squadron - Bf 109 G-14 „Black 8" had been shot down. At the same day three Bf 109s had been destroyed and other three had been more-less slightly damaged during bombing raid of Mustangs from 249 Sqn and 213 Sqn on the Lučko aerodrome.

At 1st April 1945 2.ZLJ had only 15 Bf 109s - 12 at Lučko and 3 at Borongaj, but only eight of them were operational.

info based on Boris Ciglić, Dragan Savić & Milan Minevski book „Messerschmitt Bf 109 - The Yugoslav Story vol.II" published by Jeroplan Books



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