

COST OF WAR

THE BATTLE OF FRANCE SAW THE AIR FORCE OF FRANCE, THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE, AND ALLIED AIR ARMS VIRTUALLY DESTROYED BY GERMANY'S LIGHTNING WAR
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This battle-damaged MS.406C1, an improved variant of the MS.405, came down in a French farm after tangling with Messerschmitt Bf 109Es. The MS.406 was France's most numerical fighter and one of only two French designs to be built in numbers exceeding one thousand. Entering service in early 1939, the MS.406 with its retractable landing gear, monoplane configuration, and enclosed cockpit was considered to be the *Armée de l'Air*'s first modern fighter. Although sturdy and relatively maneuverable, the MS.406 was underpowered and underarmed.



Morane Saulnier MS.406C1 No. 923 appears to have suffered bomb damage at a French airfield. Note how German troops have cut out the insignias from the fabric. On the eve of the German invasion, ten *Groupes de Chasse* were operating MS.406C1 fighters but once the Germans began to move, some 150 MS.406s were quickly lost to *Luftwaffe* fighters while another 250 to 300 were knocked out of action due to other causes such as bombing, strafing, or simply being overrun by German troops while on their airfields.

Today, casual historians regard the Battle of France as sort of a walk-through by German forces. It was far from that. The Germans committed some 141 divisions to the invasion of France and they were opposed by 135 French and Allied (Belgium, United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Luxembourg) divisions. The German aerial armada composed some 5638 aircraft against a French and Allied force of around 2900 aircraft. For the most part, the aircraft flown by the *Luftwaffe* were vastly superior to those of the *Armée de l'Air*. The French flew a bewildering collection of flying machines — from the relatively modern to planes looking like they emerged directly from the Great War. The *Luftwaffe* hit the French forces hard in the air and on the ground, with the goal of destroying as many on the ground as possible while the German army would take over airfields with lightning speed. The Germans began their move on 10 May 1940 and by 25 June, it was all over. As the Germans pushed west, it seems many French crews simply abandoned their aircraft rather than making an attempt to fly the English Channel to relative safety of Britain. This left the enemy with lots of intact and relatively intact aircraft and these Germans are using an *Armée de l'Air* Morane Saulnier MS.405 as a prop for a photo to send to the folks back home. The MS.405 was an attempt to create a more modern fighter for the *Armée de l'Air* and the first example flew on 3 February 1938. The aircraft was fitted with one 20mm cannon firing through the nose and two 7.5mm machine guns in the wings (note how they have been ripped from their wing mounts) while power came from a Hispano HS 12Ycrs V-12 engine of 900-hp. This particular aircraft was captured at a French airfield overrun by German forces. As can be seen in the background, some of the hangars are undamaged while the one on the right is partially collapsed.

