



“Phony War” Fighter

Morane Saulnier 406 TEXT & PHOTOS BY JOHN DIBBS

A 1938 design that started production in January 1939, the Morane Saulnier 406 was France’s most numerically important fighter at the outbreak of WW II. By March 1940, 1,000 machines had been produced with a final total of 1,176. Basically a good low-wing monoplane design of plywood construction, the type’s weakness was lack of power—the 870hp Hispano Suiza HS 12Y-31 allowed a top speed of only 304mph/490kmh—and its 20mm Hispano-Suiza HS-9 and two 7.5mm MAC-1934 machine guns were ineffective.



Owner/pilot Daniel Koblet flies the license-built Swiss version of the sole-surviving Morane Saulnier 406 (Dornier D-3801) over Duxford, England.

GALLERY

The German Bf 109E, which the 34.84-foot-span 406 encountered in the battle-raged skies over France during the "Phony War," was a far superior fighter. Thrown into the breach as the best that France's Armée de l'Air could offer, casualties were high: 400 machines were lost, compared with the 175 victories attained by the type. Further losses were incurred by the aircraft being destroyed on the ground.

After the collapse of France, the Luftwaffe took over the surviving captured airframes and utilized them as trainers and supplied them to aligned states, such as Italy and Croatia. The Syrians used the MS 406 against the RAF, too. Other users included Switzerland, Turkey and Finland, and the Finns re-engined the type with a Russian engine. ✈



Above: the license-built Dornier made many changes to the original French design: more power was first, as the intricate cowl wraps around a Hispano 51-12 1,000hp engine, whereas the original Hispano put out only 870hp. The manufacturer's plate is pictured.

Below: the Morane's cockpit is interesting in that its three-faceted instrument panel wraps around the pilot and because of its bright color coordination for the various gauges.





Above: the portside of the fuselage is adorned with the Storch Squadron markings of SPA I/21. This was the unit of famous WW I French ace, Rene Fonck. The unit was based at Lexeuel during the first months of the war.

Left: the French tricolor fin flash adorns the all-metal rudder. All control surfaces are metal on the aircraft. The French services adopted the roundel and tail flash in WW I, with the British following suit but reversing the color order to discriminate.

Both the Dornier and MS 406 share a wood and aluminum original construction that's bonded and sandwiched together on the wings for greater strength. In this beautiful rebuild, however, the option was taken to make the wing all metal. The wheels are angled out owing to limited room in the wings upon retraction, with the added benefit of improving ground handling. The larger engine necessitates a larger radiator area, and so the Dornier has a tailwheel for ground clearance; the MS 406 had a skid.

