

# Airfix 1:72 Gloster Gladiator Mk.I

by Robert Allen

Airfix's recent resurgence has been, in my opinion, the best thing about the hobby over the past couple of years. Airfix has gone from a firm who was moribund and stagnant a few years ago to being one of the most active companies in the field, releasing new kits seemingly every month. And since many of Airfix's new kits are 1/72nd scale kits of British aircraft, which happens to be my primary modeling interest, how could I not be thrilled?

The Gloster Gladiator was among the final gasps of the biplane single-seat fighter concept that had endured for two decades. Entering service with the RAF in February 1937, it remained in use during the early war years, in France, Norway, Greece, and the Middle East, before being supplanted by more modern monoplane fighters. It was also used by a myriad of other air forces, from Belgium, Sweden, and Portugal, to China, Lithuania, and Iraq. You can build Gladiators with swastikas from three different air forces – Latvia and Finland flew them, and Germany used them in squadron strength as target tugs after capturing Soviet aircraft inherited from the Baltic countries. There are lots of interesting options for Gladiator color schemes.

Airfix has needed a new Gladiator mold for some time. It has had a Gladiator in its catalogue since 1956 – in fact it was one of six models released that year that were the first non-Spitfire aircraft kits released by Airfix. The old kit shows its age – all you need to know about it is that there is no cut-out in the fuselage for the cockpit, just a molded-on pilot's head to go under the canopy. Frog, Matchbox, and Heller later released 1/72nd



Gladiator kits. The Matchbox kit was actually acceptable – I built it many years ago, one of only two biplane kits I've ever successfully completed, so it mustn't be too bad – but the Heller version was the kit of choice for about a quarter-century. Sword and Pavla have both released limited-run kits with resin detail parts within the past decade, but this is the first new all-plastic Gladiator in this scale from a mainstream manufacturer for many years.

This boxing is for a Gladiator Mk.I; Airfix has the Mk.II, with a ski option, advertised on its site as a future release, but strangely enough it shows the Mk.II fitted with a two-blade Watts prop instead of the three-blade Fairey one it actually carried. The Mk.I boxing has only the two-blade Watts option. There are two sprues with 49 parts molded in fairly soft grey plastic, and one with five parts molded in clear. The clear parts come in their own bag, always a nice touch. The decal sheet features two choices – the Shuttleworth Trust's restored example, masquerading as a pre-war aircraft of No. 73 Squadron, and an Irish Air Corps Gladiator from 1940. The eight-page

instruction sheet includes a page with ten rigging diagrams, and full color painting and decal placement drawings for both options.

There aren't that many optional parts in the kit, but what there are, are welcome. Two different styles of air intake at the bottom of the engine cowling are indicated as options on the instruction sheet, but there's also a third option included that isn't mentioned – part A15 is a tropical filter intake, which is crucial if you plan to model one of the Gladiators that fought in the early stages of the desert war. Two sets of tires are provided, flattened and rounded, to use depending on whether you're building the aircraft in flight or on the ground. Wheel hubs are separate for both versions, which facilitates painting. Two canopy options are provided, with armored windshield and non-armored, and both are catered for as open or closed canopies. The closed canopies are molded as one piece each, while the open canopies have the two windshield types molded separately, with the same rear sliding hood to be used with either option. If you build it with the cockpit open, you also have the

option of folding down the cockpit door on the port fuselage side – a separate door is provided, but if you choose this route, it requires some surgery to be done on the fuselage. The prop can be built either with the small spinner cap or without (more on that in a bit). The kit is molded with the radio masts on both the fuselage and fin; both decal options are aircraft that are missing the fuselage mast, so check your references to see if you need to remove it or leave it on if you're modeling a different Gladiator. Finally, and I have to give the mold makers a ton of credit for this, if you want to pose the Gladiator on the ground, the hand crank to start the engine is included.

The fabric detail is done well, and the panel lines, which on some new Airfix kits have been faulted for being too deep, look just fine to me. Cockpit detail is good, although the instrument panel, which is attached to the rear set of cabane struts, has only a decal for detail. The Bristol Mercury radial engine is also excellent for the scale, and the cowling is

molded in three parts; it wouldn't be too hard to leave one of those loose if you wanted to detail the engine and show it off. The exhaust pipes are molded with the bottom part of the cowling, which makes alignment foolproof. Speaking of alignment, the outer wing struts have a feature that I've never seen before. The two sets of wing struts are molded with an 'X' holding the struts together, with the correct spacing and angle already taken care of. You glue them to holes in the top and bottom wings, and then when dry cut away the plastic connecting the struts together. This could work brilliantly, or it could be a nightmare if the cuts aren't made cleanly. I can't imagine trying to sand off excess plastic from a strut already installed on a biplane without fear of snapping it, but it may be necessary. In any case, some paint touch-up is inevitable.

The two decal options feature one silver aircraft, the Shuttleworth Trust Gladiator, and one camouflaged Irish one. The silver is silver paint, rather than NMF. As I mentioned earlier, the Shuttleworth Trust

aircraft, L8032, is painted to represent K7895, an aircraft that future ace 'Cobber' Kain flew at the Hendon Air Pageant in 1937, with No. 73 Squadron's striking blue and yellow diamond markings. A small note – you have to decide if you want to build the existing aircraft as it is seen today, or the original it is representing. The current aircraft has the spinner cap on the prop, but photos I have of the original aircraft show it flying without one. There's also a minor typo on the decal placement drawing for the Irish Gladiator – there's a white number 48 shown on the tip of the starboard lower wing. Just ignore it. It isn't a marking, and decal number 48 is the Irish insignia, which is only on the upper wing.

All-in-all, this looks like another spectacular kit from Airfix. And in common with most of their recent kits, it's very reasonably priced. Although a Series 2 kit, I picked up mine for just \$9.49 at one of the local hobby shops. A kit of this quality for under \$10 is a deal that's hard to pass up.