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Airacobra Strikes Again

P-39
NEW GUINEA
ACTION

AROUND
THE WORLD
IN 67 HOURS!



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A production test pilot poses with a YP-39 before he takes it up on a test flight. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)

Holding the Fort with the **Iron Dog**

by Donald Nijboer

THE REAL STORY OF THE P-39 IN WW II

Surprise was on their side. One hundred eighty miles north of their base and thousands of miles from home, 13 young American pilots, flying the revolutionary Bell P-39 Airacobras, were about to attack the Japanese deep in enemy territory.

In the spring of 1942, Japanese military expansion showed signs of stalling. The unexpected defeat of the Japanese invasion fleet bound for Port Moresby in the Coral Sea in May 1942 gave the Allies a vital toehold in the South Pacific. Undeterred, the Japanese decided to take Port Moresby by using land forces that would march over the Owen Stanley Mountains. Initially, the Japanese steadily advanced towards Port Moresby, but Allied forces were quickly deployed and forced the Japanese to alter their strategy. Back from North Africa, the battle-hardened Australian infantry quickly reinforced Port Moresby and moved forward to meet the Japanese.

In May 1942, two squadrons of P-39s from the U.S. 8th Fighter Group flew in to reinforce the RAAF's 75th Fighter Squadron, which flew P-40s. Keen to engage the enemy first, the 8th FG was soon airborne with 13 P-39s headed for the enemy airfields at Lae and Salamaua on New Guinea's north coast.

Riding the turbulent air 100 feet above the ocean's surface, the P-39s pointed their noses towards Lae. Twenty miles out, their radios crackled to life, and four P-39s throttled up and moved ahead of the formation to be ready to engage the Japanese air patrol over its airfield. It worked. The top cover drew the enemy patrol off to the east of Lae and left the remaining Airacobras

with nothing but airfield. Surprise was complete. The nine remaining P-39s tore across the Japanese airfield spitting 37mm, .50-caliber and .30-caliber shells into parked aircraft, ammo dumps, a radio station and three floatplanes at anchor.

Ground fire was late and inaccurate, and with the strafing run complete, the Airacobras pulled up hard into a climbing turn. Several Zeros managed to get airborne and catch the escaping four P-39s. They released drop tanks and turned to engage their attackers. The dogfight attracted more Zeros, and the four Airacobras were soon in a desperate fight. Mike keys were punched and their



Recently damaged in a landing roll-out accident, the restored P-39Q Airacobra Miss Connie belongs to the Commemorative Air Force. (Photo by Xavier Meal.)



An armorer loads shells into the ammo magazine for the 37mm cannon that's located in the P-39's nose. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)

desperate calls for help were heard. The remaining P-39s turned to race to their rescue. The sky was soon a sea of twisting fighters, their wings alive with fire and lead. This continued for about 30 miles along the coast and then back again; with ammunition and fuel running low, the P-39s broke off and headed for home, leaving behind four downed Zeros and four of their own (three of the pilots eventually returned to Port Moresby). It wasn't a decisive victory, but the attack on Lae airfield showed that at the right height, the P-39 could fight the Mitsubishi Zero on even terms. Often maligned by the men who flew it in the South Pacific, the P-39 Airacobra proved to be a useful fighter and one that deserves more recognition in the USAAF's history.

Brig. Gen. Charles "Chuck" Yeager stated that he thought the P-39 was the best airplane he ever flew, and most pilots remember its flight characteristics with affection. But not all pilots had Yeager's skill and natural abilities. Although the P-39 had some sterling flying qualities below 12,000 feet, at higher altitudes it was sluggish and uninspired as a single-seat fighter, and many who flew it had nothing good to say about it.

Much has been written about the Spitfire, Mustang, Hellcat, Corsair, Thunderbolt and Lightning as being the truly remarkable fighters of WW II—so much so, in fact, that one could conclude that these fighters won the War! With respect to performance, they were true thoroughbreds and all except the Spitfire had the benefit of valuable combat information. Combat reports written by the European powers on the performance of their fighters were available, and U.S. manufacturers incorporated those lessons in their fighters. But the Grumman Wildcat, the Curtiss P-40 and the much maligned P-39 (referred to as the "Iron Dog") were forced into combat with what they had. And what the P-39 had was a lot more than history has given it credit for.

Although its contribution to the war in the Pacific and the



About five years ago, the Yanks Air Museum, located in Chino, California, restored a P39N. Its cockpit is shown here; note one of the .50-caliber machine gun butts protruding into the cockpit, with the red charging handle just to the lower-right-hand part of the gun. (Detail & Scale photo by Bert Kinzey.)

LUCK OF THE IRISH

Rabble-rousing in an Airacobra

by 1st Lt. Peter A. McDermott, USAAC (Ret.)
as told to and written by James P. Busha

EXCEPT FOR THE SOVIETS, WHO

successfully used the Airacobra in vast numbers, most P-39 Allied pilots did not consider themselves lucky to do so. Most called it an "Iron Dog"—and that was one of the nicer names! But with a war on, men fought with what they had, and for one P-39 pilot, just being able to fly and fight for his country was all he needed to overlook the aircraft's shortcomings. Along the way, he also used up a whole pot of Irish luck! This is his story.

After I earned my wings in early 1943, I was sent to a crummy field in Pennsylvania that had a bunch of Piper L-4s and other low and slow observation planes on it. I was young, I had my wings, and I wanted fighters. There was a war on, dammit, and I

wanted to be in the middle of it!

I was known as a "wise guy," and I'm sure that being from Brooklyn, New York, with an accent and an Irish name didn't help me much. After a couple of months, I was thrown off that base and transferred to an L-4/L-5 outfit in Charlotte, North Carolina, as its operations officer. They didn't like my attitude, either, so I didn't last long and was soon transferred again. That's when I really started flying!

I was sent to Georgia for P-39 Airacobra-RTU fighter school! This was fantastic flying. We wrung those P-39s out until they couldn't take anymore. The instructors, some of them were combat vets, would take eight planes up in trail, and would

then go full out as we tried to stay with them—straight up, straight down and through every combat maneuver they could think of while trying to shake us.

I enjoyed flying almost every airplane I have been in, but the P-39 was a really lousy airplane; simply put, it was a dog. But this dog could take a beating and still bring me home—minus some important pieces! I listened to all those hotshot instructors tell me how low they had flown the P-39, and not to be outdone, I went out to see whether I could go lower.

During one of my cross-countries, I proved that I could go lower than the rest: I flew right through a damn tree! Both my wingtips were sheared off, and there were holes between the 20mm guns and a large hole inboard on the right wing, but I was still flying. I climbed to 10,000 feet, cut the throttle and pulled the nose back to see where it would stall. I got a heck of a shudder at around 170mph and returned to the field to land.

I made a straight-in approach and never let the airspeed drop below 185 knots. I made one three-point landing followed by

three skips and skids before I at last wrestled the P-39 to the ground. I was in deep trouble now! For my punishment, I had to give a Saturday night lecture to the pilots—all of whom just wanted to go into town, get drunk and do other things—on how not to fly through a tree while on a military cross-country.

A new group—Tactical Reconnaissance—was formed while I was in Georgia. Our class was the first to go through the training, which consisted of aerial photography, strafing and skip-bombing. The principal tactics used had been learned from the British in North Africa. Daily, we practiced high-speed, low-level attacks followed by low-level damage assessment that used the K-20 camera embedded in the aircraft's belly.

After months of training, the survivors of our class were blessed by the brass, and

Painted almost exactly as it was in WW II, this original P-39Q-6 airframe, which was flown Peter McDermott during the War, was restored by the Fighter Rebuilders of Chino, California. It is currently owned by The Fighter Collection and is based in Duxford, England. Pilot is Steve Hinton. (Photo by John Dibbs/The Plane Picture Co./Planepix.com.)



Mediterranean was not significant in terms of enemy aircraft shot down (300), the P-39 managed to hold its own. But, more important, the P-39 and the P-40 gave the Allies what they needed most: time. Though inexperienced aircrew flew against the formidable Mitsubishi Zero pilots in the Pacific, they eventually managed to achieve a one-to-one kill ratio. This is a remarkable figure because in the first months of the War, the Japanese pilots enjoyed a considerable advantage in terms of combat experience and equipment. The time gained allowed the Allies to build up their forces and introduce newer and faster fighters such as the Hellcat, Corsair and Lightning.

Although the USSR viewed the Allies' fighters with indifference (Hurricane and P-40), the P-39 was highly regarded. At low altitude, its sparkling performance caused problems for the Luftwaffe's top pilots, and many leading Soviet aces scored most or all of their victories while flying it. An informal count has more than 30 Soviet Kobra pilots with at least 20 victories. The P-39's contribution on the Russian front was significant and should not be overlooked. The success of this aircraft in the low-level regime played a major role in the defeat of the German Army.

GENESIS

The P-39 was designed by a team of engineers whose ideas never matched the practical needs of combat operations. The P-39 airplane was pleasant to fly and very easy to take off and land, and when it was first

revealed, it was introduced to the world in a glowing blaze of publicity. With its 37mm nose cannon, an engine buried in the fuselage behind the cockpit and a claimed top speed of 400mph (644 km/h), it seemed to be all that was claimed and more. But the aim of advertising is to sell an idea, and, unfortunately, the P-39 could not live up to the hype. Its makers failed to recognize the differences between a lightly loaded, highly polished prototype and a fully equipped operational version. By the time the P-39 reached the production stage, its weight had increased by a staggering 30 percent, and its performance had been emasculated by the removal of the



In October 1941, the RAF was the first to use the P-39 in combat. It proved, however, to be unsuitable for use in the ETO, so most of the British contracted P-39s went to the Russians to use on the Eastern Front. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)

all-important engine turbo-supercharger. What Bell had promised could not be delivered, and for the British Direct Purchase Commission, it led to terrible consequences. In 1940, few voices were raised against Bell's claims for its new fighter. The British Direct Purchase Commission had high hopes for it and ordered 675 aircraft. At the time, Britain was fighting for its life, and the overriding need was for fighters and more fighters. America had what Britain needed, and it isn't surprising that major contracts were signed for almost anything with wings.

In October 1941, the RAF was the first to use the P-39 in combat, but of the original 675 ordered, only four aircraft flew missions across the English Channel! Dogged by armament problems, low serviceability, an unreliable compass and poor high-altitude performance, the P-39 proved unsuitable for combat in the European theater. The RAF experience with the P-39 was not entirely typical; following Germany's attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, most of the contracted British P-39s went to the Soviet Air Force.

The decision proved to be sound. The Soviets needed a fighter with good low-level capabilities and enough firepower to deal with ground targets, and the RAF needed to rid itself of an embarrassing equipment program.

Not only did the Soviets need aircraft urgently, but the U.S. was also in desperate need of fighters. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the USAAF scrambled for fighters. Aircraft allocated for export were quickly requisitioned—among them, nearly 200 of the British-ordered P-39s. These found their way to the Southwest Pacific and were designated as P-400s to suit British contractual purposes. This version was also armed with a 20mm cannon in place of the original 37mm.



Back in the states, a P-39 mechanic prepares to tighten some of the fasteners that hold the aluminum nose panels in place. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)

War for the USAAF P-39 began in Port Moresby, New Guinea. Arriving in Australia in March 1942, the 35th and 36th Pursuit Squadrons of the 8th Pursuit Group began operations (in May, they were reconfigured as fighter squadrons and groups). In April, the first detachments were deployed north to the frontline at Port Moresby. Early losses were incurred, but the two squadrons had achieved operational status under extreme conditions by the end of the month.

COMBAT ACTION

Keen to engage the enemy, the 8th FG sent out 13 P-39s on an offensive sweep. At Lae and Salamaua, the Japanese were caught completely by surprise. Three of the Zeros shot down were credited to Lt. Col. Boyd D. "Buzz" Wagner—one of the first U.S. aces of the

we became tactical reconnaissance pilots. In November 1943, I was sent to New Guinea. I thought I had at last made it to where the action was, and I hoped I'd be given a real fighter to help win this war. I reported to my new squadron, the 82nd Tac-Recon, which was part of the 71st Tactical Reconnaissance group.

When I saw the P-39s on the flightline at Port Moresby, I could have killed myself! I wanted to be in fighters and not in the dopey P-39s. To add insult to injury, New Guinea is covered by jungle. This wasn't the barren North African wasteland of which we had been trained to take pictures, so we didn't use our cameras very much.

But we did use our guns and cannon a lot. We went looking for the Japanese who hid in the jungle. The P-39 I flew carried two .50-caliber machine guns in the nose and four .30-calibers in the wings. It also had a 37mm cannon that fired through the propeller. On paper, the cannon appeared to be a good idea, and it sure looked menacing sticking out of the nose, but in operational use, it was a joke. We were lucky if it fired one out of every 10 rounds.

During one gun run, I located my target in the gunsight, fired the cannon, waited for the "blop" and then took my eye off the sight as I waited and then watched the round hit somewhere close to the target. It was just a big old popgun with a lot of problems. War is hell, especially in a P-39 cockpit.

Our squadron primarily went after Japanese barge traffic, airstrips and troops hidden in the jungle—and wherever else a short-range, low-altitude, lightweight fighter

Flying over New Guinea during the War, Peter McDermott's Brooklyn Bum the 2nd is out to hunt the Japanese, who were hiding in the jungles below. (Photo courtesy of Peter McDermott via Jim Busha.)



At the 71st Tactical Reconnaissance Group's Dobadura, New Guinea, base, two 82nd Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron members take a well-deserved break from their daily flight duties. (Photo courtesy of Peter McDermott via Jim Busha.)

words "Erin Ga Braugh" (Ireland forever) to the door. Being Irish, and flying P-39s over the jungles of the South Pacific, I figured I needed all the luck I could get, especially when my tent mate, Lt. Joe Grenda, and I were called into the CO's office!

was needed! Eventually, I got my own P-39, probably because no one else wanted it. I named it Brooklyn Bum 2nd in honor of my mother and father, who were faithful Brooklyn "Bum" Dodger fans. I also had the squadron painter add a yellow horseshoe that straddled a green shamrock and the

Maj. Gordon, our squadron CO, was a really nice guy, but he hardly ever flew missions and wasn't very good behind the stick. He had caught us doing low-level aerobatics and buzz jobs over some high-ranking enlisted SOB. Joe and I had flown together in the States, and we were able to

fly circles around most of the guys in the squadron, but as we were the new guys, the major thought he needed to teach us the proper way to operate U.S. military aircraft. Very sternly, he told us, "I'm going to take you two up and show you fighter tactics." Holy smokes! Joe and I looked at each other, thinking the same thing: he's going to show us fighter tactics!? Inside, we were laughing hysterically.

We were based at Dobadura airbase in New Guinea, and it had a wide, steel-plank runway. The three of us cranked up our P-39s for our mini training flight. Little did the major know that he was the one about to be trained! I was number two and Joe was number three as we taxied behind the good major on our way to the run-up area.

Maj. Gordon cocked his airplane at 45 degrees to the runway and began his run-up. The major never looked at us and had his head so far up his butt that he never saw me next to him. He opened his throttle, and his P-39 lurched forward and began its takeoff roll. I don't know why I did it, but I followed him right down the



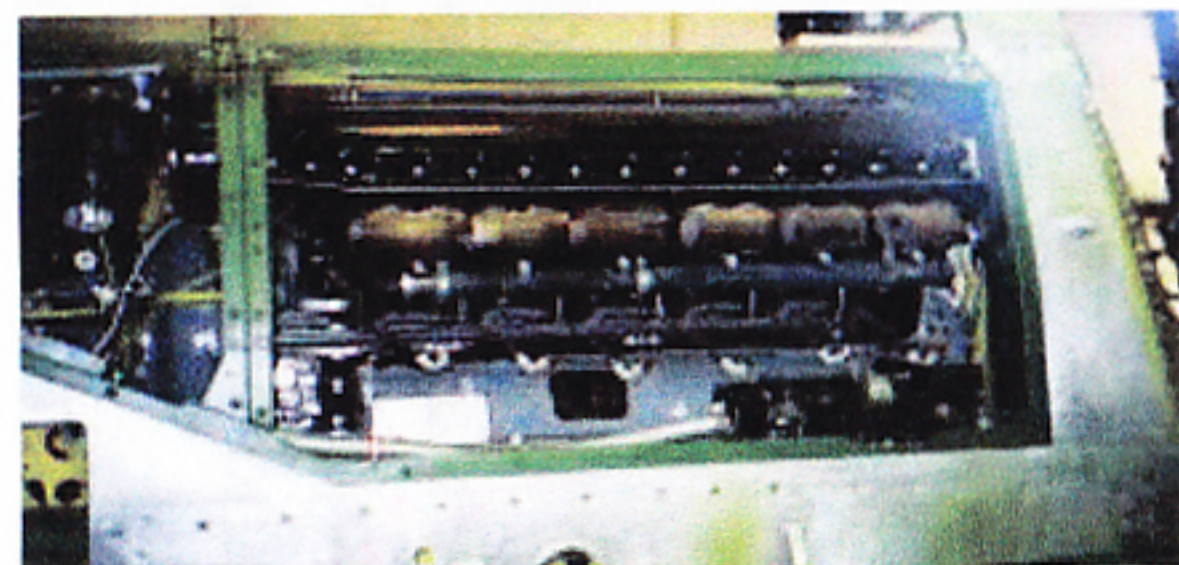
As a stateside AAC pilot looks on, armorers load .50-caliber ammunition into his P-39. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)

Pacific war. Wagner regarded the P-39 as an excellent antibombardment fighter at altitudes of up to 18,000 feet, and he assessed its performance as "... about 10 percent better in every respect than the P-40." This settled the use of the P-39 for much of the Pacific war. Although they were never able to gain the upper hand on the Japanese, P-39 pilots managed to give as good as they got. And when one takes into account their pilot superiority and technical advantage of with the Mitsubishi Zero, the much maligned P-39's accomplishments are remarkable.

The 67th FS of the 347th FG was next to see action in the South Pacific. While the P-39s and P-400s of the 8th and 35th FGs battled with the Japanese over eastern New Guinea, pilots and ground personnel of the 67th arrived at the Tontouta airfield in New Caledonia on March 15, 1942, and were followed, a week later, by 47 crated P-39s. The difficulties experienced by the men of the 67th made the British experience look like a walk in the park. The aircraft they were given lacked instruction manuals, assembly tools and spare parts, and only two pilots had P-39 experience. Six days after the 67th arrived, the first P-39s took to the air, and during the next 29 days, 41 aircraft were assembled.

After a short training period in August 1942, the 67th moved to Guadalcanal and began ground-attack operations using 500-pound bombs. The first kill was registered within 48 hours. During August and September, the Japanese threw everything they had at the Americans on Guadalcanal. U.S. Navy and Marine fighters rose to the island's defense and claimed the most victories. Time after time, P-39 pilots took off to intercept an incoming raid only to find that the Japanese bombers flew too high for them—above 20,000 feet. The P-39's high-pressure oxygen system and Allison engine were not suited to high-altitude combat. Its other major disadvantage was its size: it was small. With the engine behind the pilot, there was little room for fuel. Even when fitted with a drop tank, it was risky to fly for much longer than two hours.

By the beginning of 1943, only a handful of units still flew the P-39, and by the end of the year, the P-39's Pacific career was over. But there was some hard fighting ahead, and the P-39 went on to make a lasting impression. Between February and August 1943, the P-39s of V Fighter Command claimed more than 40 of the 50 kills credited to USAAF units. Much of the action took place above the advance airstrip at Wau, New Guinea. After losing the ground battle for Wau, the Japanese bombed and strafed the airstrip well into mid-



The P-39's Allison V-1710 engine was located just aft of the cockpit. Power to the propeller was achieved via a driveshaft that ran through the cockpit, between the pilot's legs, and to a reduction gear box in the aircraft's nose. (Detail & Scale photo by Bert Kinzey.)

1943. It was up to the 40th and 41st FS pilots to oppose these raids. They also had the task of protecting C-47 transports that flew supplies and men into the base.

On February 6, both units intercepted a formation of seven Ki-21s, escorted by 21 Japan Army Air Force Ki-43 Oscars. At the time, eight 40th FS P-39s were escorting C-47s over Wau. Finding themselves in a sound tactical position, they dove into the attack with guns blazing. As they tore through the Japanese formation, 11 fighters and one Ki-21 fell to their accurate fire. The year 1943 proved to be the most productive ever for the P-39 units in V Fighter Command, but as the action shifted in the Allies' favor, U.S. fighters with longer range frequently flew combat missions over enemy territory. The short-legged P-39 could not follow and was often left to perform less glamorous missions such as local patrols and transport escort.

The P-39 Airacobra will not be remembered for its fighter-vs.-fighter combats over Guadalcanal and New Guinea during 1942 and 1943, and though many pilots had harsh words about it, it did, in the final analysis, contribute a great deal to the Allied victory over Japan. It was inferior to the Mitsubishi Zero and Kawanishi Ki-43 fighters, but it managed to fight the Japanese to a draw. Considering the brevity of training most young U.S. pilots were given before they went into combat and the aircraft they were forced to fly, it's a wonder they did as well as they did against the well-trained, experienced Japanese. Indeed, if the P-39 had been equipped with a turbo-supercharger, the Japanese would have suffered even more! The P-39, and the men who flew it, managed through great hardship to chip away at the powerful Japanese air forces. The constant loss of Japanese aircraft and well-trained air crew set the scene for the arrival of more powerful Allied fighters that, when they entered the fray, put the Japanese on the defensive and scrambling to secure their key Pacific bases.

BACK IN THE USSR

While the Japanese expansion was being checked in the South Pacific, the P-39 found glory above the frozen steppes of Russia. Two



The P-39 was used in the Aleutian Islands, as well, to help ward off the Japanese, who were trying to invade Alaska. Here, ground crew personnel from the 54th FG perform extensive maintenance on one of their charges. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)

weeks after it saw combat over New Guinea, it began a brilliant career on the Russian Front. The Kobra first saw service on the secondary fronts in the far north and south and only later operated over the main fronts in the center of the country. Though it may have failed everywhere else, in the USSR, it was an incredible success, and at the end of the War, some of the leading Soviet aces resisted the transition to more modern types.

The first P-39s to enter Soviet service came from the UK, which sent 212 Airacobra Is via Murmansk. Initially, the Soviet pilots were bothered by its unfamiliar tricycle landing gear, but they were soon won over: they found that it gave them better control on the ground and greatly improved their forward vision when taxiing. It was also far superior to any other fighter when it came to taxiing across snow-covered landing fields. The P-39 was also faster and

runway and practically stuck my wingtip into his ear.

I was waiting for him to look my way and see that we were now in a formation takeoff. He had no idea that I was there. As soon as I saw his wheels getting light, I sucked my gear up and moved closer. He looked over at me with wide eyes and big mouth open; he damn near spun in!

Joe took off behind us, fighting our propwash the whole way, and he cut the turn to catch us. He stuck his wing into the major's other ear, and we looked like one perfect airplane as we flew alongside him. Maj. Gordon began to look from side to side at us as sweat poured down his face. At last, he hit his rudder pedals very gingerly as a sign for Joe and me to go into trail. He then did some half-assed tight turns, and that was it. We returned to base and he never said a word to us, and he



During a lull in the action at Dobadura, members of the 82nd Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron [F] pose for a group shot. (Photo courtesy of Peter McDermott via Jim Busha.)

never again flew with us.

Because our P-39s had such a limited range, we never ventured out more than

two hours' flying time from our base. I never saw Japanese airplanes in the sky, only crashed ones in the jungles below. Our

missions became so routine—shooting up the same targets and using the same tactics—that, at times, it was boring. On one mission, I had a little fun with my wingman. Another tent mate and I were out shooting up an enemy village we had been to many times. My wingman pulled into a Lufbery Circle, and I was right behind him as he set up for his gun run. When he made his turn in, I cut right under him, my propeller mere feet away from his P-39's belly.

I waited for him to fire, and when I saw his tracers go off, I fired all my guns at once. My bullets whizzed underneath and out in front of him as he pulled straight up and began to scream over the R/T, "Ack-ack; ack-ack." I couldn't stop laughing at the shrillness of his voice. When we landed, he damn near punched me out!

In a year, our squadron moved eight times, and each time, we were told that we

would get replacement fighters. They just never told us when, and I damn near missed the chance to upgrade. On one of my last flights in the P-39, I was sent out over the Pacific to escort PT boats returning from their night raids on the Japanese Navy.

I was at 5,000 feet, sitting pretty and looking really nice with the PT boats somewhere below. Suddenly, my propeller began to over-speed, and I had a runaway. I waited for the engine to freeze up, and the longer I flew, the more I worried about jumping. I just couldn't get myself to bail out because I knew I had a better chance of surviving a shark-infested water landing than a jump from a P-39.

To bail out, you had to pull the door off, roll out onto the wing with your chute and survival pack strapped to your rear end and hope and pray that when you rolled off the trailing edge, you wouldn't get hit by the

horizontal stabilizer. We pilots talked about this frequently, and we all agreed we were too scared to jump.

The Allison engine kept on ticking, and I made it to an emergency strip in one piece. Shortly thereafter, we got new fighter planes. Because we were such a bastard unit, we got a bunch of war-weary P-40s—just like us: a bunch of castoffs! The P-39s went to the Australians more than 50 years ago, and that was the last time I saw Brooklyn Bum 2nd.

I flew more than 134 missions and survived, sometimes barely. Each time, though, the P-39 brought me home. On my last P-40 flight of the War, I couldn't resist buzzing the group HQ building. Unfortunately for me, my Irish luck ran out because a full bird colonel was watching, and when I landed, he arrested me and had me for lunch. Obviously, he didn't have a sense of humor!



A P-39 pilot has suited up for some cold weather flying, possibly in the Alaskan Theater. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)

had a better rate of climb than the Soviet I-16, MiG-3 and LaGG 3 single-seat fighters, and its all-around-vision transparent canopy proved superior to anything the Soviets produced. Soviet pilots found the Kobra cockpit roomy, warm and comfortable, and it also had a superior radio. At the time, most of the older Soviet fighters didn't have a radio, and the newer models weren't adequate. The radios fitted in most MiGs, LaGGs and Yaks could only receive messages. The P-39's radio system allowed the units who flew it to adopt more complex and more open formations. It also meant that junior pilots could warn of approaching enemy aircraft and allow their leaders to make the appropriate adjustments on the spot. It may be no coincidence that some of the most innovative tactics developed and the highest-scoring aces came from P-39 units.

Like all fighters, the P-39 had more than its share of faults. While the Soviets put it to exceptionally good use, it did suffer from a temperamental engine. Its distaste for Soviet aviation fuel did not help: oil tended to pool in the engine and then freeze in the harsh winters. Soviet pilots were told to bail out only as a last resort; the Americans had already discovered that jumping out through the side "car door" was, at best, risky.

At low and medium altitudes, the Kobra was more than a match for the much vaunted German Bf 109. According to the British Air Fighting Development Unit, which compared a P-39 I to a captured Bf 109E, "... the Bf 109 cannot compete with the Airacobra in a turn, and even if the Bf 109 is behind the Airacobra at the start, the latter should be able to shake it off and get in a burst before two complete turns have been carried out." The Bf 109 pilots then tried to dive on the Airacobra and then continue to dive down to ground level after a very short burst of fire. It was found, however, that the P-39 could follow and catch up on the Bf 109 in a dive of

SNAKE CHARMER

The P-39's Dark Side

by Maj. Melbourne "Mike" Wilson, USAF (Ret.)
as told to and written by James P. Busha

IN MAY 1943, WHILE I WAS A cadet at Luke Field in Litchfield, Arizona, I began a love affair with the Bell P-39 Airacobra. All through flying school, we were asked to write down our top three choices of which planes we wanted to fly after graduation. Every time, I wrote "fighters," and next to that, "P-39s." I left the second and third choices blank. I couldn't get it out of my mind.

Well, I got to fly P-39s, and after a blindfold checkout, I roared down the runway with unobstructed forward vision. I thought I had died and gone to heaven! My flight was absolutely fabulous. The P-39 was very quick and easy on the controls. All I had to do was "breathe" on the stick, and the aircraft would do whatever I wanted it to do. Two kinds of people flew the P-39: those who hated it, and those who loved it. I loved it, but during my flight

indoctrination, I also saw the dark side of my new mount.

When a bunch of us were out rat racing—chasing tails across the countryside, right-side up and upside-down, trying to clobber one another—I got behind a guy and pulled through a 4G turn. The combination of propeller wash and high G snapped me into the most violent spin I had ever experienced. It almost felt as though I was tumbling rather than spinning out of control. I fought to rein it in and wrestled it back under control; this 'Cobra had one helluva bite!

After a whopping 60 hours in P-39s, I was combat ready. I was also given some choices: I could pack my bags and join a fighter unit in the South Pacific or Europe, or I could stay and instruct. The lure of combat was tempting, but I was having so much fun in the P-39 that I didn't want the party to end! I stayed.



Here in the states, a flight of P-39s head out for some practice formation flying. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)



First Lt. William F. Fiedler Jr. was the only U.S. pilot to achieve ace status in a P-39. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet.)

more than 4,000 feet (1,220 meters). For the Soviet Air Force, this was perfect. Its arm was tactical in support of the ground forces. Most of its operations, if not all of them, were at low and medium altitudes—exactly where the Kobra performed the best.

Of the 9,585 P-39s built, 4,773 went directly to the USSR, and in the spring and summer of 1943, the very best Soviet units were P-39 Airacobra regiments, mainly assigned to 216 Air Division, which became the famous 9 Guards Air Division. Just as the Spitfire will be forever remembered as a symbol of the Battle of Britain and the American Wildcat for the extraordinary victory at Midway, the Soviets will always remember the Kobra for the battle over the Kuban and the German "Blue Line." Though this skirmish was dwarfed by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's spring offensive and the Battle of Kursk, it was these battles that pitted the best of the Luftwaffe against the best Kobra pilots of the Soviet Air Force. The success of the Kobra in Soviet hands is exemplified by the success of 298 IAP (Istrebitelnyi Aviatsionnyi Polk; Fighter Aviation Regiment). Over a five-month period, between March 17 and August 20, flying against the Luftwaffe's 8 Fliegerkorps above the Kuban and Blue Line, the regiment flew 1,625 sorties and shot down 167 German aircraft. Losses amounted to only 30 aircraft shot down and 11 heavily damaged.

The P-39 was so successful in the hands of capable Soviet pilots that the second-highest-scoring Allied ace with 61 kills to his credit (five shared) flew the Kobra. Grigori Rechkalov began his operational career during the battle over the Kuban early in the summer of 1943. He was an excellent shot and scored 61 victories in 122 air combats while flying a P-39Q.

For the Soviets, the P-39 Airacobra was an unqualified success. In the low- and medium-altitude regime favored by their Air Force, the P-39 was more than a match for the Bf 109 and the Fw 190. An incredible 179 Soviet aces scored their victories while flying the P-39. Only one American pilot—1st. Lt. William F. Fiedler Jr.—made ace status while flying it. The P-39 continued in Soviet Air Force service until the final victory over Germany. The last U.S. unit equipped with it was the 350th FG in Italy in April 1944.

In the official history of the USAAF in WW II, the Bell P-39 Airacobra was described as "especially disappointing." If these historians had asked our Soviet allies what they thought of it, the "official" history would have read "especially destructive."

On one particular flight, though, I wondered whether I had made the right choice. Launched as a three-ship flight out of Portland, Oregon, I had a P-39 student on either side of me. In a tight formation, we headed out for a little tow-target shooting over the Pacific. As we climbed through 10,000 feet, I looked back to check on my wingmen and found that the guy on my left had gone.

How in the hell could I have lost a plane in only 10,000 feet?! As I swung into a big, wide turn, I was busy on the radio calling Portland tower and trying to find the missing guy. I looked right, left and right again, and now the other plane had gone, too! Neither had said a word to me; they just disappeared.

I brought the nose up and passed through 15,000 feet in no time. I swung the P-39 up and over the top and dived straight down looking for my two runaways. As I passed through 10,000 feet, it felt as if a sledgehammer had hit me in the tail. The P-39 began to shake and vibrate so violently that I felt like a BB in a tin can. Then it pitched up so quickly that I blacked out.

When I came to, I was back at 15,000 feet, upside-down with the nose up. I rolled it back over and eased the throttle back in, and then all of a sudden, I got smacked again and pitched up to vertical. So off came the throttle, and I plodded along at 10,000 feet, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong. Adding to my fun was that the oil-temperature gauge was now in the red. It was time to head home.

I didn't have to worry about anybody else in my flight; they had left me long ago! I quickly learned to keep the airspeed below 200mph; any faster, and the roller-coaster ride would start again. I could have bailed out, but I wanted to find out what had happened so that oth-

ers could learn from whatever was wrong with this airplane. I called Portland tower and told them I had a severe emergency and was going to land—or at least make an attempt!

I touched down pretty hot at 130mph and shut the engine down, as I coasted along the 5,000-foot strip. When I had stopped, a crew chief jumped up onto my wing and said, "Hey, lieutenant, whose prop got your tail!?" My jaw dropped when I looked to the rear. Of the left-side elevator only the shaft remained. The horizontal stabilizer and the vertical stabilizer were bent and buckled along with the rudder. What a wild ride that was!

When my nerves had settled down, I figured out what had happened. During my headlong dive from 15,000 feet, the entire left elevator fluttered and departed. That had warped all the tail surfaces, including the tail cone. I was close to 500mph during my dive when all of this happened. I also suffered "tail damage" of my own; the major, my boss, chewed my ass off! As for my missing students, they had lame excuses.

The P-39 was tough and agile, and it was one of the best fighters to fly in formation. But against most of its adversaries, it was horrible in a turning fight. I found this out when I bounced a Navy Wildcat over California and that sucker turned inside of me in less than half a turn. I leveled my wings and used my speed advantage to get the hell out of there. The only way to survive combat flying in a P-39 was to "hit and run" and then run as fast as you could! The P-39 was outdated by the introduction of P-47s, P-51s, P-38s and F6F Hellcats.

After 500 hours of instructing in P-39s, including skip-bombing, gunnery runs and aerobatics, I fell in love all over again. This time, I fell for the P-39's big brother—the P-63 King Cobra. It was one hot number!