

COBRA BITES

The Commemorative Air Force's two Bell fighters, the P-39Q Airacobra and P-63F Kingcobra, fly together again

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY: LUIGINO CALIARO

Among the many warbirds operated by the Commemorative Air Force, the distinctive mid-engine Bell fighters occupy a special place. Its P-39 Airacobra is one of just two currently flyable, while only two other P-63 Kingcobras remain airworthy apart from the CAF's example.

Seldom, sadly, has it proved possible to fly them as a pair in recent years. Separate incidents required the Cobras to undergo quite lengthy periods out of action, but now all that has changed. During the recent Wings over Houston airshow, the CAF was able to display the two fighters together, and *Aeroplane* arranged an exclusive photo sortie with these rare birds.

P-39Q-5-BE 42-19597/N6968 is operated by the CAF's Central Texas Wing, based in San Marcos. It returned to the skies during 2015 after a rebuild that lasted almost five years. The aircraft suffered a crash on 3 July 2010, when its pilot landed short of the runway at Tyler-Pounds Regional Airport, Texas, and the port wing hit the approach lights. Damage was significant, involving about three-quarters of the wing leading edge, the port main undercarriage door, the centreline drop tank and both wing flaps, amongst other things. The Airacobra was nonetheless flown back to San Marcos with the landing gear locked down.

The repair process involved great efforts on the part of the CAF's engineers and volunteers. Numerous technical problems delayed completion. Finally the P-39 made its first post-rebuild flight on 15 March 2015.

The Centex Wing's example was the second P-39Q-5 built by the Bell factory. It was officially delivered to the Army Air Force on 25 May 1943 but was on loan to Bell at Buffalo, New York, until that July. On 29 December 1943 the aircraft was flown to Cincinnati, Ohio, before being transferred to Laredo, Texas in January 1944. By June of the same year it had gone to Harlingen, Texas to support gunnery training.

No longer useful to the AAF, 42-19597 was making a cross-country flight to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation scrapyard to be disposed of when the engine failed. The pilot landed at a crop-dusting strip in Hobbs, New Mexico, where the aircraft was abandoned. It was later moved to a schoolyard display at Capitan High School in Lincoln, west of Roswell.



The Airacobra was bought by Hobbs-based Joe Brown, who donated the hulk to the Confederate Air Force in 1962. At that time the aircraft had only 392 recorded flying hours. It was dismantled and trucked to Harlingen where, in 1968, Don Hull of Sugarland, Texas began to restore the fighter to flying condition. It flew again on 21 October 1974. John Stokes, founder and first leader of the Centex Wing, bought the P-39 and again donated it to the CAF.

Several years on static display ensued, but the Airacobra returned to flight once more on 9 June 2001. For some years it flew in a Soviet Air Force scheme before being painted in the livery of *Miss Connie*, a P-39 used by

the 350th Fighter Group that flew in North Africa and Italy.

A minor landing incident occurred at Gillespie County Airport in Fredericksburg, Texas on 18 April 2005, when the Airacobra's CAF pilot had to divert due to bad weather. The aircraft left the runway and rolled into a fence, resulting in slight damage to the propeller and the leading edge of one wing. Repaired, it was given the livery of the P-39N used by 2nd Lt Bill Fiedler of the 347th Fighter Group based at Guadalcanal, the only pilot to gain 'ace' status on the Bell type with five kills of Japanese aircraft — three A6M Zero-sen fighters and two D3A 'Val' dive-bombers — between January and June 1943.

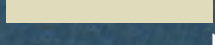
Apart from the Airacobra, the Centex Wing also supports B-25J Mitchell *Yellow Rose*, a beautiful Beech C-45, an AT-6 Texan and the restoration of a BT-13 Valiant. All these aircraft, and several others that are privately owned by CAF members, can be seen at the wing's hangars at San Marcos, which are open on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

The CAF's P-63F Kingcobra 43-11719/N6763, meanwhile, is maintained by the P-63F Sponsor Group based in Pearland, Texas. It is among the rarest warbirds flying today, as one of only two P-63Fs ever manufactured. This version was based on the P-63E, but was powered by the Allison V-1710-135 engine rated at 1,425hp. The most distinctive external difference was the F-model's higher tail and enlarged carburettor air intake scoop.

This Kingcobra was accepted by the Army Air Force on 13 September



The
Commemorative
Air Force's P-39Q
Airacobra and
P-63F Kingcobra
in formation near
Houston, Texas.



1945, the only other P-63F having been delivered to the AAF that April. Neither saw much in the way of service, particularly 43-11719. In 1946, with just in excess of 24 hours on the clock, it was sold into civilian hands. The machine was bought by one H. L. Pemberton, who used it to compete in the 1946 Thompson Trophy race in Cleveland, Ohio — won, incidentally, by future Boeing test pilot ‘Tex’ Johnston aboard a P-39Q. However, the P-63F was never heavily modified for racing.

Several changes of hands followed, 43-11719 moving from Indiana to Florida, and then Georgia. On one

occasion it was flown by that most famous American flying display showman, R. A. ‘Bob’ Hoover — he demonstrated it at an event in Alton, Illinois, on 30 May 1971. And still the Kingcobra hadn’t seen its last race, as it flew at Reno in 1976, owned at the time by Jack Flaherty from Hollister, California.



It was the P-63F’s subsequent owners, Bill and Don Whittington of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, who decided to donate it to the Confederate Air Force. The aircraft joined the CAF



ABOVE: The markings on the P-39Q are those of the N-model flown by 347th FG Airacobra ace 2nd Lt Bill Fiedler. He lost his life on 30 June 1943 when his aircraft, idling at the end of the Guadalcanal runway, was hit by a P-38 that had suffered an engine failure during its take-off run.

‘No longer useful to the Army Air Force, the P-39 was being flown to a scrapyard to be disposed of when the engine failed’

fleet in 1981. It soon became apparent that some quite significant airframe work was required, N6763 undergoing major structural repairs to the starboard wing spar and, later, the door framework.

While the Kingcobra was airworthy again by August 1983, a greater degree of sponsorship was required for its continued operation. This was provided as the years went on by CAF Colonels John Kohlhaus, Mike Collier, Scott Rozzell and John Stofer. For several years the aircraft was painted in Soviet colours, but after some further restoration work was completed it re-appeared in the original silver livery



ABOVE: The Kingcobra shows off the somewhat unorthodox method of crew entry favoured by the Bell designers.





ABOVE PICTURES: The cockpits of the two Cobras – P-63 on the left, P-39 at right – reveal the addition of some modern navigational aids for practicality's sake alongside the traditional round instruments.

used when it was in service with the AAF.

On 15 October 2013, the P-63 suffered a mishap. The pilot was forced to make a gear-up emergency landing at Sky West Airport in southern Midland County, Texas, due to an inoperative fuel selector. After the crash the airframe sat dismantled in its hangar for almost 18 months, its fate uncertain. Luckily, within a few months, a new P-63F Sponsor Group was formed. Funds were raised, and restoration work began in the spring of 2015. The main efforts were concentrated on the engine, propeller and reduction gearbox. As

Group pilots and leader of the CAF 'Tora! Tora! Tora!' display, was at the controls. He reported: "The first flight was performed after two high-speed runs down the runway. The flight was 20 minutes long, circling over Pearland airport at 2,000ft. This time was spent checking the systems, specifically the fuel system and the landing gear, including a gear-down flyby. Engine pressures and temperatures were monitored very closely. Some minor squawks were found and fixed before the next flight the following day."

After the recent photo sortie, the author had the opportunity to talk with the Sponsor Group's other pilot,

'The Airacobra is agile and quick. The Kingcobra is fast, but has heavy controls in roll, especially at high speed'

forced landings go, the aircraft had not suffered too much structural damage.

Just over a year later, it was airborne again. On 14 April 2016, it took off from its new home base at Pearland Regional Airport near Houston. Mark Allen, one of the P-63F Sponsor

Craig Hutain, who has the good fortune to currently fly both of the Bell fighters. Craig has in excess of 31,000 flying hours as a commercial airline and warbird pilot. He flies the P-51 Mustang, T-6 and BT-13, and has spent six years as a regular airshow

performer in the ‘Tora! Tora! Tora!’ group. He is the right person to ask about the differences between the Airacobra and Kingcobra.

“I first flew the P-39 in March 2015”, says Craig, “after its last repair. I now have more than 30 hours in it. I flew the P-63 for the first time in May 2016 and I have more than 20 hours in that type. I find the Airacobra to be agile and quick. It has good slow-speed manoeuvrability due to the shape of the wing airfoil. The

P-63 is fast, but has heavy controls in roll — especially at high speed — and nice elevators. Handling it requires a little more attention because of the laminar-flow airfoil. Low-speed manoeuvring can be a bit tricky. The Kingcobra also accelerates very quickly going downhill. We are investigating the addition of aileron servo tabs as a means of making it more comfortable in roll.

“I find that both airplanes are marginally quieter than the Mustang.

Having the engine and the stacks behind the pilot makes them a bit less noisy. Neither airplane has a particularly good air vent system, but with the exhaust heat behind the pilot they are both comfortable temperature-wise as well.

“The lack of nosewheel steering on both makes for somewhat challenging taxiing. The brakes on the P-39 are pretty old-school, so it is a bit more difficult. Also, the P-39 tends to get hot on the ground very quickly. The

BELOW: The P-63F is now immaculate again after repairs following its 2013 wheels-up landing.



RIGHT: A good view of the P-39's small frontal area, which certainly improves its outright performance.

BELOW: Both of the CAF's Bell fighters were star performers at the Wings over Houston airshow this past autumn.



P-63 has a wider main gear, and thus is a bit easier to handle on the ground.


"In my opinion, both are awesome airplanes. For example, while doing

found out, much to my surprise, that the P-39 is a rocket compared to the P-40. Apparently, the lack of frontal area really makes a huge difference.

'I think the P-39 and P-63 are awesome airplanes, and highly misrepresented'

an airshow earlier this year, I had the opportunity to fly the P-39 in formation with a P-40 and a P-51. I was a bit worried that I would have a hard time keeping up with them. I

Also, the sound of both the P-39 and P-63 is amazing. The exhaust stacks are just different enough from the P-40 that they really growl. Great-sounding airplanes!

"I think both are highly misrepresented among the fighters from the US inventory due to the lack of a two-stage supercharger. If we had the opportunity to get an honest, open account of the Bell fighters' performance in Russia and the Eastern Front, I believe that they would have a much better reputation." 

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