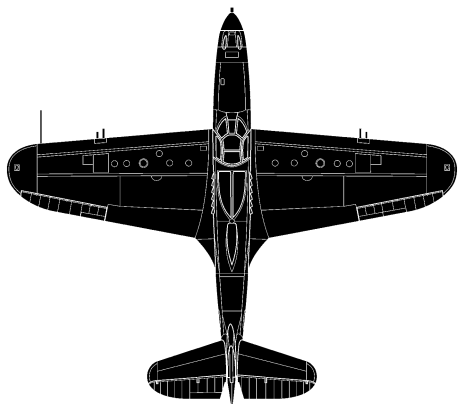


Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

P-39 Airacobra



The radically new P-39 Airacobra, begun in the late 1930s, was one of the first “modern” Air Corps fighters—the only one built around a cannon and not an engine. Bell’s unusually streamlined design placed the engine behind the pilot, inside the fuselage, so as to allow frontal installation of the big “bomber-killing” 37 mm cannon. Tricycle landing gear and car-like doors and windows in the cockpit were also innovative. Because it was light in weight, the P-39 was very fast at some altitudes.

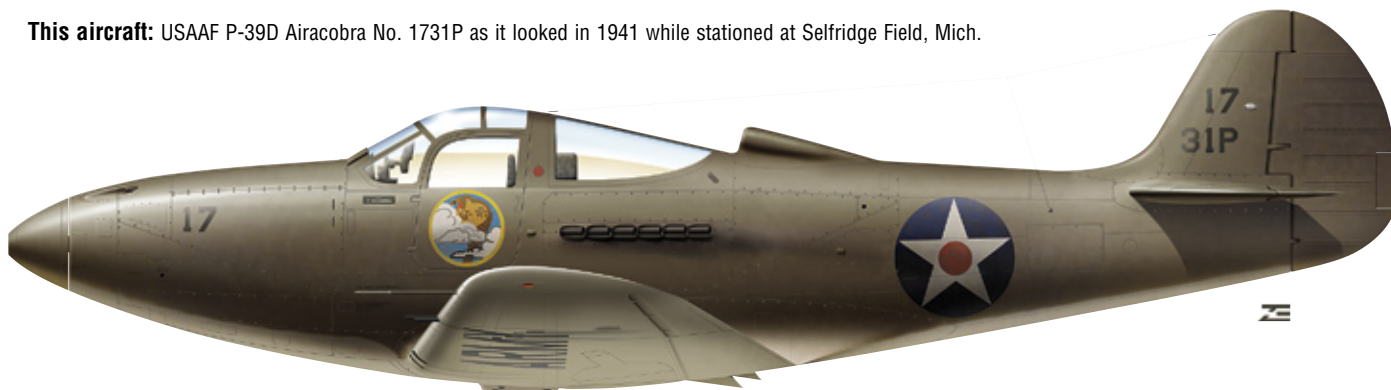
The Airacobra had, in the Air Corps, a bad reputation for “tumbling,” short range, poor performance at altitude, and armament problems. The same aircraft, however, was acclaimed by many high-scoring Soviet aces. The difference was primarily in its application. At low altitudes on the Eastern Front, it performed well even against vaunted

Luftwaffe Bf-109s and FW-190s. However, the US pilots needed to use it above 15,000 feet, an altitude at which it was less effective. The Air Corps had dropped the supercharger requirement on the assumption that a drag reduction program and a more powerful version of the Allison engine would provide adequate performance. The assumption was wrong.

Even so, the P-39 had a great virtue: It was available when war broke out in the Pacific. The infant Fifth Air Force was desperate for aircraft, and it is generally conceded that the P-39 did well in the close support role at Guadalcanal and a host of other battles. US P-39s were used extensively in North Africa and Italy. On the Eastern Front, the USSR found the P-39 to be superb at low altitudes, where its tank-killing capability was used to great effect against German armor.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: USAAF P-39D Airacobra No. 1731P as it looked in 1941 while stationed at Selfridge Field, Mich.



In Brief

Designed, built by Bell ★ first flight April 6, 1938 ★ crew of one ★ Allison V-1710-85 engine ★ number built 9,558 ★ **Specific to P-39Q:** max speed 385 mph ★ cruise speed 200 mph ★ max range 650 mi ★ armament single 37 mm cannon, four .50 cal machine guns (2 in nose, 2 in wings), single 500 lb bomb ★ weight (max) 8,300 lb ★ span 34 ft ★ length 30 ft 2 in ★ height 12 ft 5 in.

Famous Fliers

AAF Ace, P-39 only: Lt. William Fiedler Jr. **AAF Aces, Some Victories in P-39:** 1st Lt. Thomas J. Lynch, Lt. Col. Boyd D. Wagner, 1st Lt. George Welch. **Notables:** Tuskegee Airmen pilots of the 100th FS, 301st FS, and 302nd FS; Soviet Capt. G. Rechkalov, 56 confirmed kills in P-39; Col. Aleksandr Pokryshkin, 59 confirmed kills in P-39.

Interesting Facts

Half of P-39s transferred to Soviet Union ★ scored first US victory in Europe in WWII (Aug. 14, 1942) ★ also named Model 14 (RAF) and P-400 (USAAF) ★ Russian nicknames of *britchik* (“little shaver”—shaving being slang for strafing) and *kobrusha*, or “dear little cobra” ★ appears in 2006 Russian film, “Peregon” ★ P-39 lost in 1942 found in Fiji in 2004 ★ built in 16 models, 48 variants ★ besides US, Russia, and Britain, flown by Free France, Australia, Italy, Poland, and Portugal.



Airacobra in action.