



## RAAF Bell Airacobras Part 1; Some origins, backgrounds and, with a splash of colour Ver4

**Forward elements of the 8<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group, the 35<sup>th</sup> and the 36<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadrons under the command of Lt Col Buzz Wagner deployed to Port Moresby to relieve 75Sqn RAAF on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1942. During this ferry flight, some eleven 35<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron P-39s would fail to complete the Cooktown to Horn Island leg. Of these, nine force-landed; with a further two would be listed as missing.**

A few days later on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1942, the 36<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron lost a further seven P-39s along the same ferry leg, resulting in a further six being forced landed and one crashing.

So within the week some eighteen P-39s failed to complete the ferry flight.

Some twenty-six P-39s, the remnants of both squadrons reached Port Moresby

With the Japanese main base now centred on Lae, the first P-39 Squadron operation was flown on the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1942 with thirteen aircraft.

In the ensuing operation, some four A6M2 Type Zeros were shot down for the loss of three P-39s. The following day, the Japanese retaliated by sending ten Ki-21 "Sally" Army Bombers, with eight Zero escorts to bomb Port Moresby from a height of 23000 feet. Three of the bombers were shot down by P-39s using 37mm canon fire, along with two escorting fighters. The 8<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group lost only a single P-39.

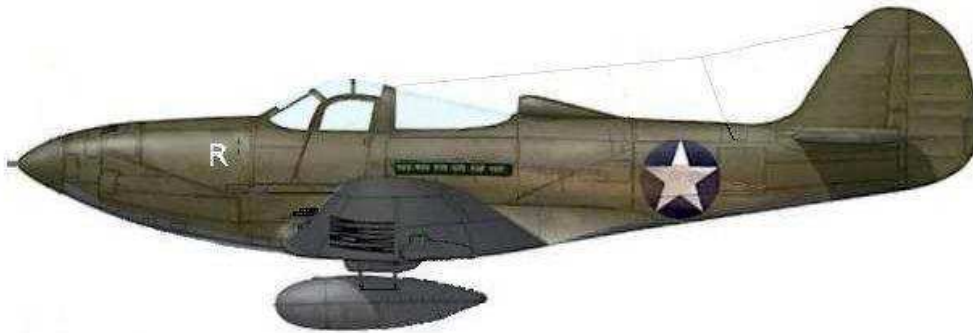
After only just five days of fighting, some fourteen P-39s had been destroyed or damaged, including some five being shot down by the enemy (with one pilot lost), four from weather related reasons, and with the remaining lost due to landings or take-offs accidents.

Added to that total, some eighteen were previously lost on the earlier ferry flights, with a further fifteen damaged/written-off during training, had resulted in some forty- seven P-39s being out of commission within the first two months of their arrival.

A total of one hundred and forty-four P-39s Airacobras (64 x P-39Ds/80 x P-39Fs) had been shipped to and assembled in Australia by that time. (See note1)



*Amberley, RAAF, March/April 1942. A single P-39D/F and mostly P-40s await collection.  
Buz Busby*



*Bell Airacobra P-39D-BE 41-6968 "R" of the 35th Pursuit Squadron on its way to Port Moresby 26<sup>th</sup> April 1942. This aircraft completed the ferry trip and survived the first combat tour of the 35th Pursuit Squadron. Damaged and temporarily repaired, she was returned with the Squadron to Townsville. This aircraft would then be allocated to the RAAF as A53-14 following repairs on the 31<sup>st</sup> August 1942. 23, 83, 82 and again 83 Sqns RAAF used A53-14, before being handed back to the USAAF on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1943. Further to her RAAF Service, she was withdrawn from USAAF use on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1944 and condemned on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1944. GRB*

### **Dire needs of the RAAF**

As often mentioned in my P-40E Series, the RAAF was desperate to obtain sufficient fighters to equip its fighter squadrons. They did manage to obtain enough P-40E/E-1s to equip three Squadrons for its immediate needs, but with the looming threat of invasion and commerce raiding, they needed more fighters.

The production of the Boomerang was only tooling up, with the prototype yet to fly. The service acceptance of a small number of Ex-Dutch Brewster Buffalos, in the face of its previous service record in Malaya and NEI, unwelcomed. And finally, the forlorn hope of Spitfires being sent out, being unrealistic in the near term. Therefore another modern type was to be considered. That was the P-39D/F Airacobra.

Through the salvage and repair of crashed USAAF P-39s by 3AD(RAAF Amberley) and the allocation of war weary 8<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group P-39s, the RAAF managed to obtain its fourth fighter type to enter service in July 1942. They were intended to equip 23 Squadron at Archerfield, 24 Squadron at Townsville, both in Queensland and finally 25 Squadron at Pearce Western Australia.

Initially it was intended to equip one flight of each designated with nine P-39 aircraft, with the balance of flights being made up of Wirraways. All pilots of the squadron would become proficient in their operation.

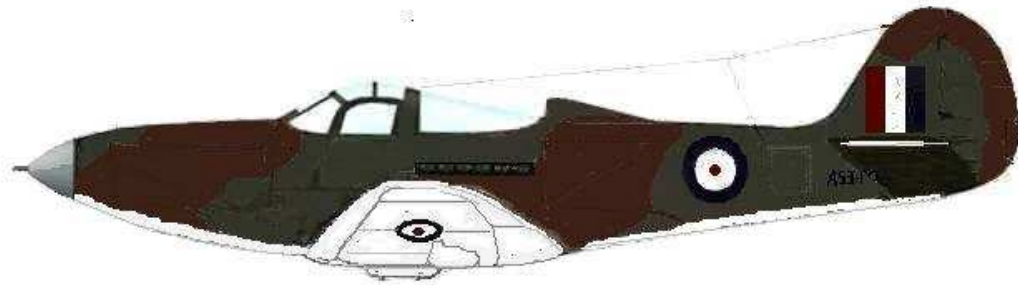
There appeared to be errors in the assumption that 24 Squadron was getting twenty-four P-39s in July 1942, however that was wrong.

In truth, seven **P-39Fs** were to go to 24 Squadron first (**A53-1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7**) and another seven available **P-39Ds**, not nine as often quoted, (**A53-8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14**) were to be allocated to 23 Squadron, now located at Lowood. 25Sqn RAAF received none.

The supply of these weary P-39 aircraft came only our way due to an additional shipment of P-39D-1s (41-283\*\*\* to 41-38\*\*\*'s) arriving in June 1942 and the imminent supply of P-38 Lightnings in July 1942 for the USAAF.

## Some origins

The very first Airacobra, **A53-1**, had a short USAAF career in Australia.



*Bell Airacobra Model 15B P-39F-1-BE A53-1, ex 41-7119 as marked 27<sup>th</sup> July 1942. GRB*

Built as a P-39F-1-BE and accepted into the USAAF as **41-7119** on the 21<sup>st</sup> December 1941, she was crated and shipped out as part of Project "X" on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 1942 on the SS Mormac Star, arriving in Melbourne on the 20<sup>th</sup> February 1942.

From there she was assembled at Laverton RAAF by the 4<sup>th</sup> Air Depot, USAAF and flown up to Lowood and accepted by the 80<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron by mid March 1942.

This Unit provided trained pilots and replacement aircraft for the other two squadrons in the 8<sup>th</sup> Group.

During April/May 1942 it appears that the aircraft was landed wheels up, requiring salvage and later repairs at Amberley. Held at 2 Aircraft Park at Bankstown, the aircraft issued to the RAAF as **A53-1**

The aircraft met its demise on the 19<sup>th</sup> February 1943 at 09.30hrs when P/O A F Tutt of 24Sqn RAAF had an engine failure in flight. The Pilot abandoned the aircraft over South Luddenham, near Sydney. Officially it was written off by the RAAF on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 1943.



*RAAF & USAAF Personnel, moving a recently un-crated P-39F into the assembly Hanger. Note the Glossy finish of the cockade. Buz Busby*

One other P-39D-BE also had an interesting pre-RAAF history. That was **A53-9**.

Originally contracted as a Model 12 P-39C Airacobra at a cost of US\$41479.00, aircraft FY serial **40-3035** was built as a P-39D-BE along with the remaining 59 contracted aircraft.

Accepted in the USAAF on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1941, she was issued to the 31<sup>st</sup> Pursuit Group, and at Selfridge. It was damaged at Briggs Field, Zanesville OHIO on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1941 when 2nd Lt Charles Hoover, of the 31st PG, overshot field on landing. Repaired, it was then based at Baer Field from the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1941 with another Unit.

Following the threat of Japanese raids on the west coast of America, the operating Unit was based at Fresno from the 14<sup>th</sup> December 1941.

From there the Unit flew to Everett, Washington on the 27<sup>th</sup> December 1941, then onto Port Angeles, Washington by the 30<sup>th</sup> December 1941.

Following this period of higher readiness, the aircraft was sent to Sacramento Air Depot on the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1942 for servicing and then crating. From San Francisco it departed to Australia on the SS Mormac Sea, arriving in Brisbane on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 1942. By the 9<sup>th</sup> March 1942 it was received at Amberley by 3AD waiting to be assembled. Following assembly, it was issued to the 80<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron then based at Lowood. There it was to suffer a forced landing during April-May 1942. Salvaged and repaired, it was diverted to Australia on the 30<sup>th</sup> July 1942 to become **A53-9**.



*Bell Airacobra Model 15 P-39D-BE 40-3035, Group number unknown, when with the 31<sup>st</sup> Pursuit Group July 1941. GRB*

Later, an additional supply of P-39D/Fs was issued ex USAAF stocks in 1943.

Most, if not all, were pre-loved P-39D/Fs that had already survived a tour at Port Moresby during April-June 1942 or have had an accident during training that required rebuilding.



*P-39D/Fs undergoing re-assembly at Amberley RAAF Base March/April 1942.  
Note the Pre-war red centre Cockades. Buz Busby*

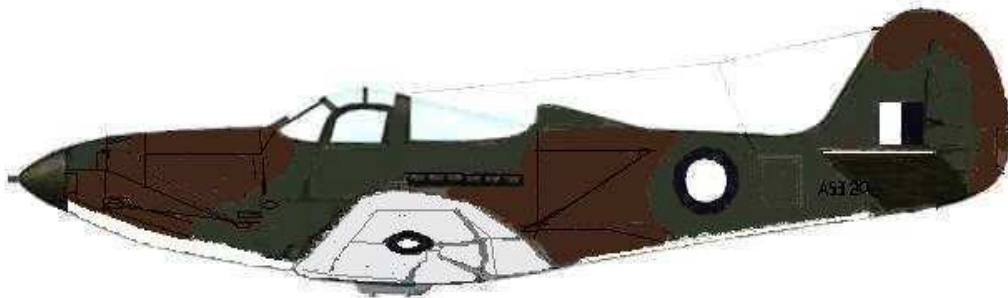
One of the most interesting histories was that of P-39D-BE **41-6838**

Accepted into the USAAF on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1941, she was crated and shipped out to Australia on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1942 as part of Project "X", the reinforcement of the Philippines. Arriving at Brisbane on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 1942 along with fifty-three others on the SS Mormac Sea, she was transferred by truck to Amberley RAAF Base for assembly by 3AD/USAAF Erection Centre. She emerged from there assembled and test flown on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1942 and assigned to the 35<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron of the 8<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group, then working up at Lowood. Late in April 1942 with twenty-four other P-39D/Fs in two separate flights, she commenced her flight to Port Moresby as part of A Flight.



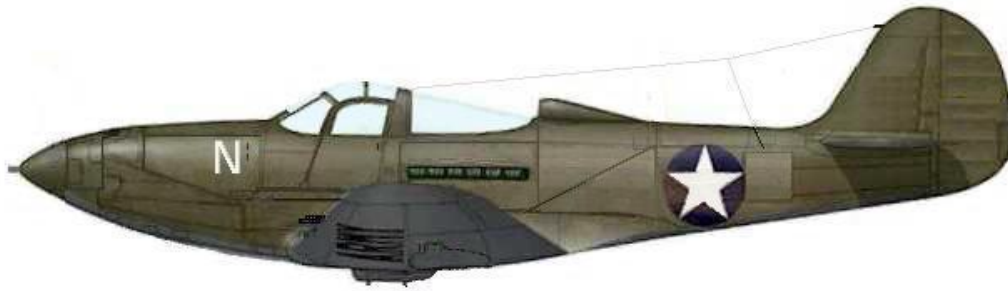
*Bell Airacobra Model 15 P-39D-BE 41-6838, piloted by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Richard Nowlin of the 35<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1942 as depicted on its ferry flight. Air Corps Circular 100-4 per August 1941 was actioned per having the Aircraft's Serial number being painted on the fin. GRB*

From Woodstock on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1942, near Townsville, the flight flew to Cooktown to refuel, before heading off to Horn Island. **41-6838** didn't make it. She was forced down by bad weather in Princess Charlotte Bay on the coast. Here, on the beach, the pilot, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Richard L Nowlin, made a forced landing. He was one of Seven A Flight pilots who force-landed or crashed that day. (A further four B Flight P-39s crashed also on that day) The pilot was picked up the next morning and taken to Cooktown by boat. The aircraft was also eventually salvaged in July 1942. There the history is blank until it was handed over to the RAAF in 9<sup>th</sup> July 1943. As a footnote, Nowlin would be killed on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 1942 whilst ferrying another Airacobra of the 35<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, when he crash-landed on a beach at Murdoch Point, North Queensland.

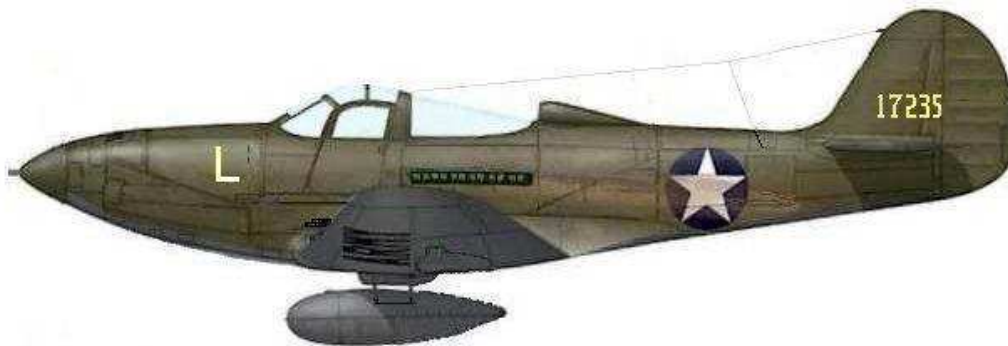


*Bell Airacobra Model 15 P-39D-BE 41-6838 was delivered ex-3AD as A53-20 on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 1943. She did not see any RAAF Squadron service and would be returned to the USAAF on the 29<sup>th</sup> September 1943. It became on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1944 surplus to requirements, with it being eventually taken off USAAF inventory on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1944. Of interest was the fact that this aircraft was fitted with a P-40 Export E4 engine when accepted into the RAAF. GRB*

### Other examples of repaired/war weary P-39D/Fs



*Bell Airacobra Model 15 P-39D-BE 41-6947 "N" of the 35th Pursuit Squadron. This aircraft completed the ferry trip to Port Moresby 26<sup>th</sup> April 1942 and survived the first combat tour. Received by 3 AD 13/05/43 and was accepted in the RAAF as A53-18. It was to go to 82 Sqn RAAF but this was cancelled. Returned to the US 5th Air Force 04/10/43, she was re-crated and sent back to the United States on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1943. There several USAAF training Units used her before being salvaged at Spokane on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1945. GRB*



*Bell Airacobra, Model 15B P-39F-1-BE 41-7235 "L" of the 35th Pursuit Squadron. Of particular interest, this was the highest FY serial numbered P-39F delivered to Australia. It arrived in Brisbane on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 1942 on the SS Merriweather Lewis. Assembled and accepted on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 1942.*

Ship #41-7235, from records, suffered a landing mishap in May 1942. Location unknown, but suspected it was Port Moresby in early May 1942.

Previously operated by the 80th Pursuit Squadron at Lowood, prior to being transferred as a replacement aircraft to the 35<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron in May 1942. Transferred to the RAAF via 3AD Amberley on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 1943.

Renumbered A53-21 on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1943 it was allocated to 82 Sqn RAAF on the 17<sup>th</sup> July 1943, however it was subjected to a C.T.O. Inspection as to the serviceability of the aircraft. Following this, the allocation to 82 Sqn RAAF was cancelled on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1943.

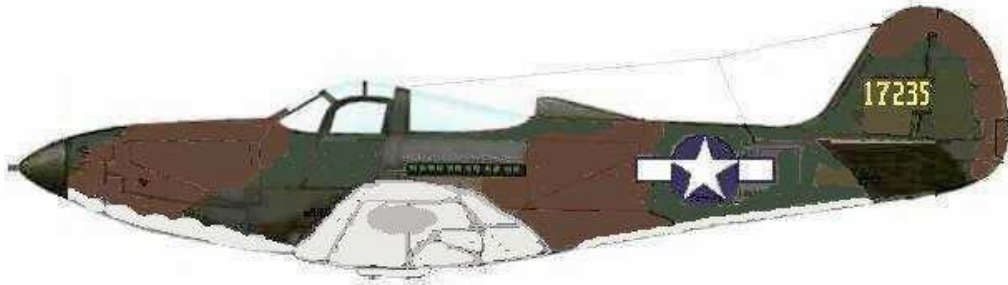
By the 15<sup>th</sup> September 1943 it had been re-allocated to the 5<sup>th</sup> AAF.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> September 1943 she was issued to the 5th AAF.

Due to necessity of repairs to the airscrew, flaps, and also the inside wheel well fairing, the aircraft was held and repaired by 3AD at Amberley till it was issued to the USAAF on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1943.

That day it was delivered to the USAAF from Archerfield, unable to operate with a belly tank. Used as a 5<sup>th</sup> AAF Hack for a short while, it was withdrawn from service on the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1944.

Given the material state, it was surveyed on the 28<sup>th</sup> May 1944 and dropped from USAAF inventory.



*Bell Airacobra P-39F-1-BE 41-7235/A53-21 post RAAF. Perhaps with Star and bars in early 1944 out of Eagle Farm. No photograph exists to confirm. It may have been natural metal or Olive Drab again. GRB*

I hope that you found this article a fresh start as much as I did on this aircraft type. Hopefully in the coming future Part 2 we will be able to narrow down the accident locations and other interesting details, which have not previously been published.

*Example: 41-6838 was not the only P-39D/F that was rescued from Cape York and then entered RAAF Service.*

*Special thanks to Damian Waters (Author of “Beau’s, Butchers & Boomerangs” –Mareeba-The History of a WWII Airfield 1942-1945) for his help on the 8<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Groups ferry flights to Port Moresby. To Buz, who temporarily converted from P-40s to P-39s, thanks Mate.*

*As usual, my heartfelt thanks to the USAAF AHRA and to the NAA with reference to the A53/P-39 Cards.*

*Please note: My Aircraft Profiles that are depicted in any story are representations only, though every effort is made to be accurate given the information and photographs that are available.*

**Gordon R Birkett compiled @2005 Researcher & Co-ordinator for ADF-Serials Site (Specialising WW2)**

*1.Nb USAAF IRC Cards have it as 144 whereas shipping totals have it as 146. Also the total excludes the 97 P-400 Airacobras sent at the same time to equip the three Pursuit Squadrons of the 35<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group. That is outside our story, save for one aircraft.*