

# WHEN THE MUSTANG WENT TO WAR

HOW THE BRITISH PURCHASED THE AIRCRAFT THAT BECAME KNOWN AS THE MUSTANG AND HOW THE RAF TOOK IT INTO COMBAT - PART ONE

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On 1 September 1940, German military forces invaded the sovereign nation of Poland which resulted in the United Kingdom and France signing a declaration of war against Germany on 3 September. Then, something very strange happened. While Poland was being bludgeoned by German air, ground, and sea attacks, the two new combatants stood back and did very little against their newly declared enemy. The British, in particular, put forth all sorts of plans to disable the German war machine including the placement of an Anglo-French force in the Balkans; an invasion of Norway to cut off Germany's main supply of iron ore; and, perhaps the most improbable, a strike against the Soviet Union to stop that nation's supply of oil to the Germans. In the meantime, there

was a scramble to speed up production of aircraft and war materials and this included purchasing armaments from a variety of foreign sources. Since little in the way of military action was actually taking place, this period became known in the popular press and to the public as the "Phony War" and most citizens of Britain, France, and the European countries outside of Poland went about their daily business as Poland was torn to pieces.

The British knew they needed more aircraft — lots of them — and the British Purchasing Commission (originally known as the Anglo-French Purchasing Board, but the name changed with the French surrender of 22 June 1940) visited almost every defense factory in the United States. One of their stops was at sunny Inglewood, California, where the small but growing concern of North American Aviation was

cranking out sturdy training aircraft for the Air Corps, Navy, Britain, and other nations. North American had proven they could deliver high-quality aircraft on time and on budget but the British, and French, needed high-performance warplanes more than trainers, even though those planes were essential to the war effort.

At the Inglewood factory, located on the southern portion of Mines Field, Dutch Kindelberger had formed a tight, creative team to capitalize on international militarization. Dutch knew that the P-40 series of fighters being built by Curtiss was useful but only within certain parameters while Lockheed's new contender in the form of the sleek twin-boom, twin-engine P-38 had yet to prove itself.

Kindelberger

expected a lot from his small team and he realized a new fighter aircraft could win massive orders, giving the company a very needed infusion of cash. Edgar Schmued, Leland Atwood, Ed Horkey and other members of NAA's design team talked, sketched, and extrapolated ideas not only for a new fighter (or "pursuit" as such aircraft were then called) but also for the company's B-25 bomber, NA-35 primary trainer, and a variety of other technically exciting projects.

The British Purchasing Commission viewed NAA as a "young" company that would perhaps best be suited to building other companies' aircraft, such as Curtiss P-40s, under license. This idea did not interest Dutch for he knew much greater corporate profits could be achieved by designing and building an exclusively NAA design. A proposal had to be put together, and put together quickly, for the British to examine.

The British were impressed with initial talks undertaken at Inglewood. Dutch was viewed as a no-nonsense individual capable of presenting North American's vision in a straight-forward manner. Numerous "paper" planes had been created before finally settling on a basic design for a sleek monoplane powered by an Allison V-1710 V-12, then the most powerful

V-12 in American production.

On 10 April 1940, the British and NAA signed a go-ahead letter for the building of a new aircraft that carried the company designation of NA-73X (73 was the NAA model/design number while "X" stood for experimental). That date is also significant because the day before, 9 April, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway. Denmark surrendered in just a few hours but the Norwegians would fight. By 10 June, German forces had killed or captured the last Norwegian and Allied defenders of that important country. There was a caveat to Britain's letter of intent — the British wanted NAA to obtain wind tunnel data for the Curtiss XP-46. This bloated and ponderous design was



Looking like a stage scene from a Hollywood movie (and why not since the studios were only a few miles away) an early Mustang I has its Allison run up in a hastily-constructed sandbag revetment while a "soldier" stands guard and two NAA employees man a fire extinguisher.