

COBRA III

FIRST FLIGHT, LAST FLIGHT

THIS CLASSIC CLEVELAND AIR RACER WAS REBORN FOR AN ASSAULT ON THE WORLD SPEED RECORD. HOWEVER, IT WOULD NOT SURVIVE ITS FIRST FLIGHT

BY TIM WEINSCHENKER

PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE DOUG FISHER COLLECTION

It is a tragedy when a rare aircraft is lost. There is always the amount of time and money invested to get it into the air, but if a fatality occurs then the situation becomes even more immense. When the loss comprises the pilot and a rare one-of-a-kind aircraft, then the aviation history we all enjoy is forever altered. Such a tragedy took place during August 1968 when Mike Carroll perished during the first and only flight of his just-restored Bell P-39Q Airacobra *Cobra III*. This aircraft was the historic *Cobra II* with which Tex Johnston had won the revived Thompson Trophy Race during 1946. Jay Demming would fly the racer to third place in 1947, behind the two R-4360 powered F2G Super-Corsairs flown by Cook Cleland and Dick Becker who dominated the races by sheer horsepower. By 1948, the Airacobra

was renamed *KF-1* and flown by test pilot Chuck Brown who would lead the Thompson while setting a record pace until being forced to retire on the final lap, handing the victory to Anson Johnson and his P-51D Mustang.

An accident occurred when the *KF-1* was being returned to its home base

in Indianapolis. Owner Rolin Stewart decided to not repair the plane, which had zero value now that the Cleveland races had come to an end and it sat in Indianapolis for several years. It was rescued in the late 1950s by Ed Maloney for his newly-established The Air Museum at Claremont, California. "I had a great interest in racing aircraft," recalled Ed several years before his passing. "I had been trying to trace down surviving racers from the 1930s and 1940s. Of course, this was all well before the age of the internet so information

came via word of mouth and a good deal of that was inaccurate. However, the information about *Cobra II* put us on the trail of the airplane and we found it in a rather bedraggled state. I was able to conclude a deal and then came the problem of moving the plane to California. For our museum, funding was almost non-existent but we managed to get together some volunteers and a truck, head to Indianapolis and disassemble the aircraft for the long road trip back to California. Once at our facility off Route 66, the Airacobra was assembled and put on display with our growing collection of historic airframes."

Mike Carroll came onto the air racing scene in 1965 after purchasing an ex-Royal Canadian Navy Hawker Sea Fury and having the plane flown to Long Beach Airport from Canada. Carroll was a member of the family that owned the Signal Trucking Company and he loved aviation, becoming particularly fascinated with the new Reno National Air Races. Carroll had the financial resources to turn the the Sea Fury over to Vern Barker's Pylon-Air at Long Beach, California to prepare it for competition and this resulted in one of the very first highly-modified Unlimiteds to participate in the reborn



Jack Woolams and Tex Johnston with the beautifully-prepared *Cobra I* and *Cobra II* at the Bell factory. Company employees were enthusiastic about creating two Unlimited racers that could take on all competitors. Tragically, *Cobra I* would have a very short life. (Bell)



During WWII, Airacobras fought long and hard in remote and dangerous combat zones. P-39Q 44-3866 was assigned to the 28th Fighter Squadron. As long as P-39 pilots did not try to dogfight with Japanese opponents or take the fight to over 12,000 feet, they enjoyed a number of advantages such as self-sealing fuel tanks, armor protection, heavy armament and an Allison V-12 that offered good low-altitude performance.



The specially-prepared Dave Zeuschel Allison V-1710 kicks into life at Long Beach as the Airacobra gets closer to its first and only flight. The entire airframe had been carefully filled and sanded then sprayed with primer to guarantee an extremely smooth surface. Once the aircraft had been painted, then *Cobra III* would have been quite slick.