

RETURN OF THE KING

AFTER A FIVE-YEAR INTENSIVE RESTORATION, THE RARE BELL P-63 KINGCOBRA OWNED BY YANKS ALL-AMERICAN AIR MUSEUM IS UP AND FLYING
BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

On 13 January, I was strapped into the backseat of Brandon Kunicki's immaculate North American SNJ Texan — the product of a 30-year restoration, but that is another story. Up front, Pat Nightingale was doing the driving. Climbing up and out from Chino Airport we noticed the visibility was getting quite murky compared to the way it looked on the ground. "I think the weather is going to change," said Pat and he was correct since this was going to turn into the first line of a series of storms that would blast southern California with unprecedented wind, rain, and mud slides. However, all that was in front of us for we were now concentrating on finding our target — Chuck Gardner flying Yanks Air Museum's just-restored Bell Kingcobra.

Today, the P-63 is one of the rarest of surviving WWII

fighters and we were really looking forward to meeting up with the plane for a series of aerial photos. Watching to the west, we spotted the P-63 about a quarter-mile distant coming out of the haze in a pursuit curve and heading directly toward the Texan. We were about to get busy but first let's take a look at this aircraft along with an overall examination of the type.

IMPROVING UPON THE BREED

Although the Bell P-39 Airacobra is looked upon with some disdain, one must remember that when America entered the war the P-39 and Curtiss P-40 were available in considerable numbers and both these planes aided

in slowing the Japanese advance in the Pacific. Also, the P-39 would go on to be one of the most important components in the Lend-Lease program for the Russians. Designed originally as a point defense interceptor, the



Rare photograph of our subject aircraft (third in line) at Chico AAF when it was assigned to the 433rd AAF Base Unit. Photo taken on 7 July 1944. Note the exhaust stains from the hard-running Allison. (Chico Air Museum)



Gear down, Chuck Gardner turns final for Chino. This view shows the relatively small flap area and large ailerons to advantage.