

# PIAGGIO'S FORGOTTEN FIGHTER

AN ITALIAN ATTEMPT TO CREATE AN INTERCEPTOR THAT COULD DEAL WITH INCREASING FLYING FORTRESS AND LIBERATOR BOMBING RAIDS

BY HOWARD CARTER

Before and during the Second World War, Italy designed and built a number of interesting fighter designs — some of which made it into production, some of which did not. However, for the most part, the Italians were behind the aircraft of the Allies and of their fascist partner Germany. There were some creative attempts at building high-performance aircraft but, for

the most part, designs were relatively conventional and were often of mixed construction rather than all-metal.

One of the less conventional aircraft was the Piaggio P.119 and this fighter actually had some American roots. The company of Piaggio was founded back in 1884 and was a well-known industrial firm that manufactured a variety of products. That year, Rinaldo Piaggio took over

his father's business in Sestri Ponente, Genova, and converted it into making ship interiors. Using skilled craftsmen, Piaggio created luxurious interiors for ships around the world. However, Rinaldo could see growth in other areas and he expanded into railroads — building and repairing rail carriages. This was an important move since it allowed him to build a team of engineering personnel and



Preparing for engine start. Note the overall clean metal work and this view shows how the engine was mounted directly behind the pilot. Also note that only two guns are installed in the nose.

repair technicians.

The start of the Great War took Piaggio into the new frontier of aviation and by 1915 the company was building and repairing seaplanes before going on to acquire a Pisa-based aviation company in 1917. They also started building anti-submarine vessels while also designing their own engines. Between 1937 and 1939, Piaggio achieved 21 world records with its aircraft and engines — built at the company's new factory in Pontedera.

In 1936, Giovanni Casiraghi was hired as chief designer. He had worked for Waco Aircraft Company in the USA and had been able to study the design of new American fighter aircraft. Using some of the ideas he had learned in the States, Casiraghi began the design of a rather unconventional fighter aircraft. Also, he wanted his new design to utilize as many Piaggio-built components as possible including the engine, propeller, and other elements.

He began putting his ideas on paper during 1938 with the goal of creating a very fast and maneuverable fighter capable of holding its own with anything produced in the USA, Britain, France, or Germany. Overall, the shape of the new design, which became Piaggio Model P.119, was relatively conventional but Casiraghi wanted to add a few touches that he had picked up from Bell. He wanted the power to come from a radial engine that would be placed mid-fuselage behind the pilot. A long driveshaft would run from the engine, under the cockpit, to the propeller. This allowed him to place the cockpit slightly ahead of the leading edge of the wing, allowing for excellent visibility. As with Bell's P-39, armament could be centralized in the nose but there would also be room for more weapons in the wing.

Whereas Bell utilized a mid-fuselage Allison V-12 for power (and for streamlining), Piaggio, wanting to incorporate their own products, used a radial engine. In the original design, a Piaggio R.XXII radial of 1700-hp was slated for installation in the prototype. However, there were problems with



The mock-up in the Piaggio factory. Note that wing guns are installed but no weapons are mounted in the nose section.



This view of the prototype under construction shows the large engine bay and the allerons that would receive a fabric covering.

this engine and delays forced the design team to utilize Piaggio P.XV radial of 1500-hp. Both engines had 18 cylinders and displaced 3237 cubic inches. The round shape of the radial dictated that the fuselage of the aircraft would also be round. To provide cooling air, a large scoop was installed under the forward fuselage that brought in air that was distributed annularly into the cooling fins via a series of baffles that directed airflow. There was also a set of cooling flaps incorporated in the fuselage behind the engine.

The new aircraft would be all-metal and the airframe would be divided into three main sections. The forward fuselage was built up



The Italians were fully engaged with their German ally in destroying Allied airpower as depicted in this early war propaganda poster.